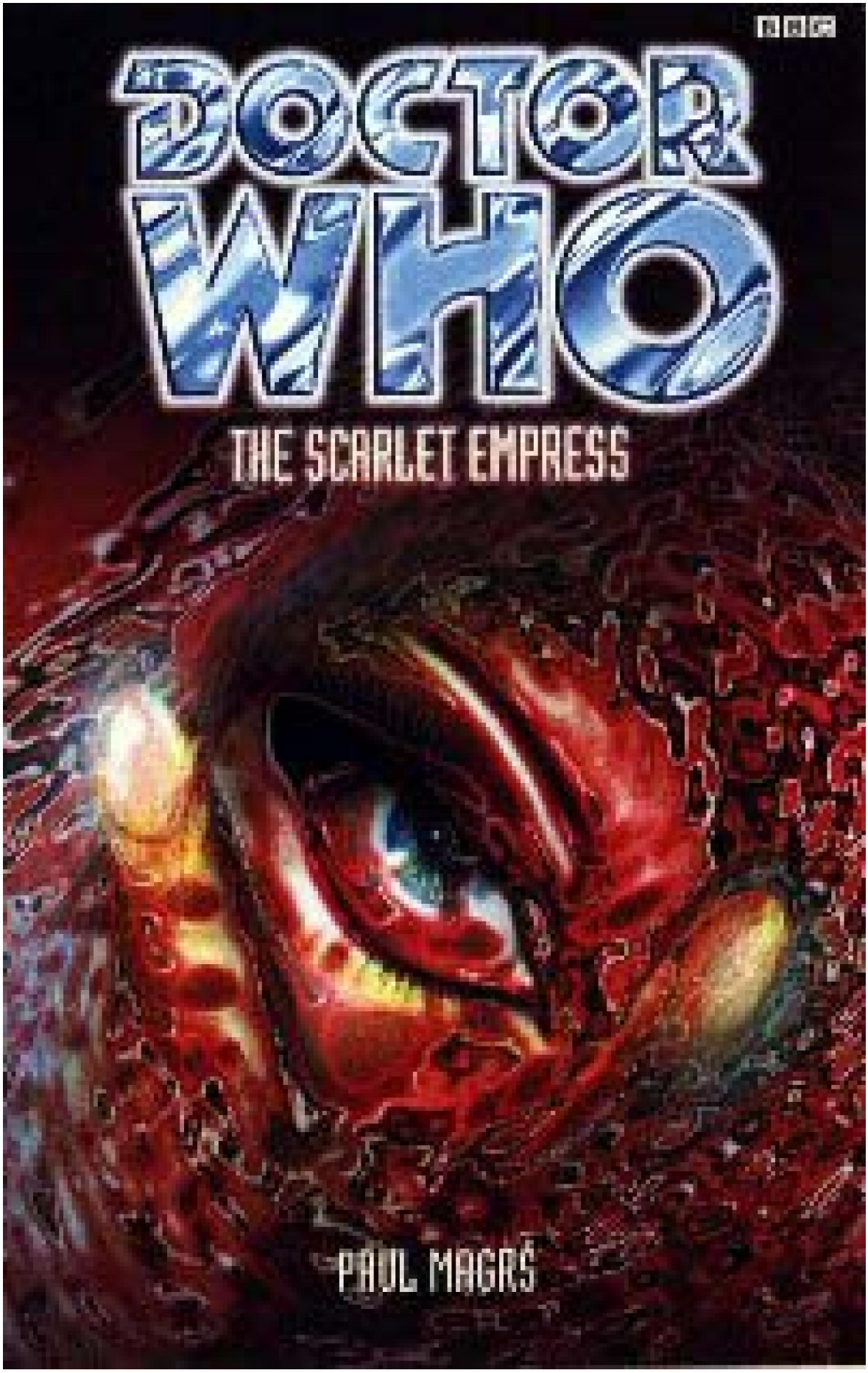
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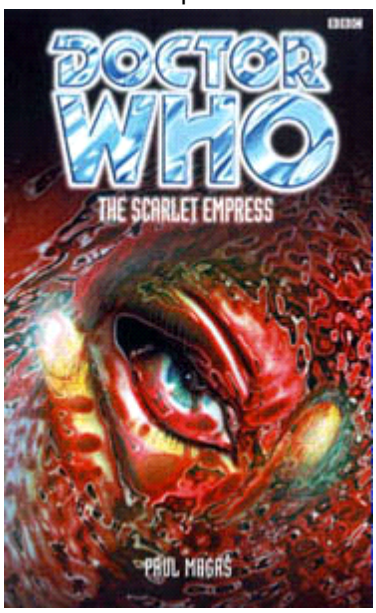
THE SCARLET EMPRESS
PAUL MAGRS

DOCTOR WHO
The Scarlet Empress



An Eighth Doctor Ebook
By Paul Magrs

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The Scarlet Empress
By Paul Magrs

This book is for Jeremy Hoad, with love.

And it's with thanks to:Joy Foster, Louise Foster, Charles Foster, Mark Magrs, Nicola Cregan, Michael Fox, Jon Rolph, Antonia Rolph, Steve Jackson, Laura Wood, Lynne Heritage, Paul Arvidson, Alicia Stubbersfield, Siri Hansen, Meg Davis,
Reuben Lane, Amanda Reynolds, Richard Klein, Paul Cornell, Lucie Scott, Vic Sage, Julia Bell, Kenneth J MacGowan.and Jeremy.

I might have missed out various companions who have seen me through other regenerations, so thanks to them too.

Welcome to Hyspero, everyone. Love, Paul.

Chapter One
Does Travel Make You Happy, Ms Jones?

All day she had tried to ask him a question. Did he ever really listen, though? Sam tried to play it cool, to make it seem as if she didn't really mind. She wandered along behind him, taking in all the sights and the rich, heady smells of the city. It was the only way to carry on with him, she had learned. Wait until he came back from whichever vague, abstracted realm he inhabited when he wasn't in a talking mood, and absorb the atmosphere of the place in the meantime. Often this meant looking out for possible danger. He looked so guileless when he was out and about, as if nothing bad could possibly happen to him. Which was ridiculous, of course, given his past record. In some ways Sam thought of herself as his protector. She was his only link with the world of common sense. He was so blithe. He never seemed to learn.

This was a city crammed with wonders. Steeples and minarets crowded the brilliant skies; onion and turnip domes, bronze and verdigris towers pricked and glinted and, when she stared up at their massiveness, Sam was overwhelmed by a kind of vertiginous awe. Something she wasn't used to. Sam, who took everything in her stride, who'd already spent a few years now knocking about the backwaters and unbeaten tracks of various worlds. Here though, in Hyspero, the capital city of the world Hyspero, Sam felt herself a mite close to becoming overwhelmed by the profusion, the teeming smorgasbord of alien life. Not alien, she reminded herself. Nothing is alien, as the Doctor occasionally told her, to a citizen of the universe. So she tried hard to feel at home in the bustling confusion of sharklike bipeds, dancing girls, turbaned and scimatar'd warriors, Draconian princes in their jewelled robes of state, ambling tortoises, monkeys and yacanas, Spiridons in purple furs and Martians in armour. Hyspero was a world where people came for adventure, romance, local colour, the Doctor had explained earlier that morning. It was a place where you could still believe in sorcery and where swords were still legal. And the shopping, he added, was fantastic. More exotic clutter for the TARDIS console room, she thought. The Ship that Sam had made her home already looked like a collaborative attempt at a Gothic folly by Aubrey Beardsley and Jules Verne. Or so the Doctor had proudly declared one afternoon, gazing around at his Ship, just after Sam had suggested that a really convincing space-and-time travelling machine ought to have an interior that was completely white and luminous, and looked a little more futuristic. That afternoon - yesterday - and not for the first time, she had hurt the Doctor's feelings. He had put

on that stung look, and had gone to watch his butterflies in the next room. Luckily he never held a grudge for long. She didn't think he had the attention span for real grievances.Whereas, she reflected, I do.

He smiled at her and led the way through the endless byways and throughways of the marketplace. Here it was even busier. Hawkers shouted out their wares and competed with each other for the attention of the milling visitors. Sam knew their patter must have been in a thousand different languages, but by now she was quite used to understanding practically everything, immediately, by virtue of the TARDIS's telepathic circuits. She was almost blase about being able to eavesdrop on anyone. The only downside to the instantaneous translation effect was, of course, not being able to learn an alien language if she wanted to. Not when everything came out in her own tongue: English, south London, late twentieth, almost twenty-first, century. So much for immersing herself in the exotic and bizarre. The way these market traders were yelling out, she might as well have been shopping down the Portobello Road. Except it was hot. The sweat was streaming down her. She could feel it drying on her T-shirt and ripped shorts. The sand of the city's rough pavements was inside her boots already and, she imagined, burning blisters with every step she took.

How contented the Doctor looked. He was an expert in simply pottering about, easing his way into crowded shop doorways, picking things up, sampling stuff, haggling away with burly, viridian-fleshed lizard women. Carpets and monkeys and coffee pots and mirrors - he was interested in everything. This was how he had made his way through life, Sam thought - picking up little bits here and there. Perusing and wandering. A browser. He filled his pockets with pomegranates and figs, he folded sprays of jasmine and other, more exotic herbs into his shopping bags, and inspected the ripest of cheeses. He thought long and hard about (and eventually decided against) buying a gaudy parakeet that was trained to answer back in the
filthiest curses. He managed to ignore the even viler curses of the trader who thought he had made an easy sale to a gullible offworlder. The Doctor simply wandered away, off to the next stall. Sam watched him produce from one of his capacious pockets a bag of glittering coins and she knew it would be the relevant currency for this time period. He walked with the insouciance of the extremely rich, and yet, in a sense, he had nothing. No real home, no proper role. Nothing to anchor him to life. This was one of the things Sam wanted to ask him about. All he had was his rackety, miraculous, ridiculous Ship and his various fragmented friendships with beings scattered throughout the centuries. But what did

he have that was really his? Sometimes she felt sorry for him, almost. He would never fit in anywhere and she was sure, somehow, that underneath his bluster and otherworldly finesse, the Doctor really minded, even resented, his alienation.

Sam realised that he had set about buying presents, accumulating a pile of packages and wrapped souvenirs and making out that he was far too busy to listen to her.

All Sam wanted to ask him was this:'In the end, do you think all your travels nave ever made you actually happy?' She had woken up this morning with the question in her head. It was one of those questions that would go round and round inside her mind until she asked it and got a decent answer. Sometimes she could be quite persistent, which, she thought, infuriated her companion. But that was what he was there for. Yet you had to be careful with his moods, sometimes. She had seen him flare up unexpectedly on a number of occasions. That was when she realised that this affable, somewhat bemused front he had wasn't the whole story. There were such depths to him, Sam knew. And these were what fascinated her and kept her travelling - however erratically - with him. She knew that, in the end, at some level, her Doctor had all of the answers. If she stayed with him long enough, he would tell her the lot. He could be a laugh, too, when he wanted to be, and he was a wizard in the kitchen, and these things also made it all worthwhile.

Today he seemed happy enough, and in the end she was content to troop around the souks with him, listening to him gossip and barter in that way he had, assuming that every stranger he met was going to be a lifelong friend. Sam was beyond the stage of being embarrassed by his forwardness with new people. She hung back and let him try to charm his way wherever he wanted to go. One of those shark people was glaring at him with dull Mack eyes, champing its many rows of serrated

teeth as he made small talk at a confectioner's with some kind of crystalline being, and Sam urged him on, out of the shark's space. Often she found herself watching his back like this. He was supposed to be an expert in some kind of Venusian kung fu, or had been at some point, but from what she had seen, he hadn't the heart to be a real fighter. If someone was giving the Doctor evil looks, it was easiest just to get him out of the way.

He protested that he had been trying to buy jelly babies.'And now I'll have to do without.' He sounded almost petulant.

Sam tutted. She thought this jelly baby thing was just an affectation. It wasn't as if he actually ate them himself. He liked to offer them to people when he first met them. It put people - especially hostile ones - off their stroke. It never worked, as far as she could tell. 'That shark thing was giving you the evil eye,' she told him.

'They always look like that! They can't help it! Poor things.' It was too hot today to argue or to pursue a point. It was far too hot this late in the afternoon to be tearing about the streets of the city still. She wanted to sit somewhere cool and catch up with herself. Her head was spinning, too, from drinking the strongest coffee she had ever tasted. And they'd told her it was decaffeinated. About an hour ago the Doctor had sat them at an outside table of a cafe and downed his own glass in one skilful gulp. He had flinched but was otherwise unharmed. Sam had a fierce headache coming on. As they passed into yet another street, she saw that shoppers and tourists were taking siestas where they sat under brightly striped awnings, and in the deliciousty cool recesses of shady cafes.

How could he stand gadding about in that thick velvet coat - his waistcoat and cravat both still fastened and neatly tied and stuck with a diamond pin? He must be sweltering. She had never known him yet dress down for a trip abroad. Next to his habitual late-Victorian foppishness she felt almost shabby. Her candy-striped shorts and Throwing Muses T-shirt had attracted a few stares this afternoon. Look at the Doctor. Elegant and unruffled. He'd seemed almost upset when she asked him why he was wearing all those clothes.

'It's just me, isn't it?' he said. 'Do you really expect me to wear a T-shirt? Come on! I was never meant to look casual. I can't do it. Casual isn't in my nature. Frenetic or languorous, yes. But nothing in between. And certainly not beachwear.' More affectation, she thought.

At one particular stall the Doctor hunted through multicoloured ropes of satin and silk, thinking, perhaps, of a waistcoat in turquoise. Hysperon merchants were well known for the silks they brought back from their travels. The way Sam had a go about how he was dressed up made him start to think about it. She thought he overdressed. She probably thought he looked ridiculous. But it had been a long time since he had cared at all about what he wore. His last two bodies had had awful dress sense. Every time he saw a photo of either of them he gave an involuntary flinch. What had he been thinking of? He seemed to remember that a

couple of his earlier serves rather enjoyed swanning about the place, forever in Edwardian evening dress, like them, he relished the idea of anachronism, of standing out in a crowd like a sartorial pun. He had caught a glimpse of himself today, several times, in flyblown mirrors, and he realised who it was he reminded himself of, with those flowing locks, that jaunty stride, the starched wing collars: I've made myself into Percy Bysshe Shelley, he thought, not unhappily. Swishing about in the Orient and making up rhymes. Or maybe I'm just Keats.

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into bis ken; Or like stout Cortex, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific - and all bis men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise -

For a few moments the screen is black. Lines run across it horizontally, fuzzy and white. There is a thunk and a whirring as the soundtrack comes on. The screen lightens, bursts into colour.

This is somebody's hand-held video camera. Searing blue skies. Impossibly blue skies, wheeling above us. Whoever holds the camera has terrible aim. The picture steadies, tries to focus. We see distant, blurry mountains, jagging the horizon. Miles of remote dunes swim in and out of our sight. This is a yawning dust bowl, open before us on the screen. The sand is the exact colour of dried blood. A salt lake winks in the glare of the sun. Cut to:

The Doctor. His grey eyes shielded by his hand, squinting into the camera. He carries his green velvet coat bunched under one arm. His shirtsleeves are rolled, his wavy dark hair hangs down over his face.

'Iris. I'm not going to tell you again.'

He turns abruptly away from us.

'I'm tired and I've nothing to say to you. So switch your camera off. I've had it up to here with you and your -'

Cut to:

The same desert scene, just as colourfully bleak, some time later. Sam is sitting happily on a rust-coloured rock. She is in the same Throwing Muses T-shirt and shorts. She wears shades, and the sunlight on her

short blonde hair is blinding.

'OK, OK, ask me. I've never seen myself on telly. What? Oh, introduce myself. I'm Sam Jones and this is me in the middle of bloody nowhere. We're all on Hyspero, having the time of our lives. This is meant to be some kind of quest and it's all down to the mad old woman who's holding the camera. That's you, Iris. OK, so here we are, making home movies in the hottest place I think I've ever been. What? Oh, I'm from Earth. London. I left in, let's see, 1997. Don't know what year it is now. Do you always interview your travelling companions? Yeah? I should get a camera. Some of the things I've seen recently. Here, give me a go. I'll film you.'

***

Later that afternoon they found they had wandered past the main tourist traps, and into the shadier, seamier side of town. The racial mix was less broad here. Most of the faces they saw were native Hysperon: the long, solemn visages, the beige flesh tones, the air of lugubriousness in the bearing of the city dwellers. 'They live under something of a regime, you see,' said the Doctor. "They're kept in line by a rather ruthless militaristic soldiery who are pledged to protect -'

As he said this they were passing the doorway of a butcher's shop. The air was thick with heavy, rank and bloody aromas that congregated in the street like djinn. All the shops down this stretch seemed to be butchers. The Doctor didn't seem to have noticed the stench. Sam hated it. She looked down and saw that the gutters were running with blood: the deep magenta of Cabernet Sauvignon, soaking into the dirty sand. She could feel herself start to gag. She turned to the Doctor and caught a flash of something running by at knee level. A small black lamb, shooting past out of the doorway of the shop nearest them. It was a ragged, pathetic-looking thing that darted through the Doctor's legs, making him stumble. He gave Sam an inadvertent shove and, as she tried to avoid treading on the escaping beast, she took a headlong fall on to the hard-packed ground. She swore.

'Sam!' chided the Doctor. He had dropped all of his shopping. Around her lay pieces of burst fruit, tissue paper, and bits of a pottery owl he had bought for someone. He bent to help her up, a stupid smirk on his face.

The lamb stood in the bloody gutter. It stared at them, squealed a very unsheeplike squeal and bounded off into the alleyway, soon losing itself

in the crowd.

"That was a lucky escape for someone,' smiled the Doctor.

'Good thing, too,' Sam retorted.

Now seemed an appropriate time as any to ask her question. 'Doctor, are you -' She was swiftly interrupted by the butcher himself, who darted full pelt from the rank confines of his shop. He was swathed head to foot in black netting, from which dangled pink gobbets of mangled flesh. He bellowed incomprehensibly and waggled a duty-looking scimitar at them, holding it close up to his misshapen plum-coloured nose and brandishing it in a way that was likely to do more damage to himself than those he was accusing.

'He's furious,' the Doctor murmured, and quickly helped Sam to her feet. She checked on her sunburned, lobster-pink knees and found they were gashed and bleeding.

The butcher gabbled at them, spittle flying out of his mouth and catching on his thick black beard. For some reason Sam couldn't understand a word he was saying. Either he was insensibly angry, or the TARDIS was refusing to translate. Sam didn't mind either way.

'He says we've taken his whole livelihood.' The Doctor surmised hurriedly, in that excitable way he sometimes had. He gripped Sam's scuffed elbow. "That straggly little beast was apparently worth a thousand dirnas. Either we reimburse him, or risk the consequences.'

Sam gulped.'I've got no money.'

'And I've spent every penny I had.' His parcels lay scattered up the pavement. 'I always do.' Some of his things had already been whisked away by passers-by. Even the smashed pieces of the ceramic owl.

The butcher was still shrieking and waving his scimitar, but now he was crying for the Scarlet Guard.

'Is the Scarlet Guard the military force you said everyone was so scared of?' Sam asked.

"That's the one,' the Doctor nodded.'Terrible lot.'

Sam backed off into the crowd, dragging the Doctor by the sleeve of his green frock coat. She looked for a clear street to run into. Suddenly every route looked impassable. A whole host of curious, hostile faces were shoving in to see. Then she saw a particular, uncrowded alley.

'Not up there,' the Doctor said, pushing through. 'Over half the streets in this city fetch up in dead ends. That's one of them. Come on, this way.' And then he was off.

They pelted through the stifling, fragrant, chaotic hugger-mugger of the souks. And behind them they could hear the wailing of some kind of horn. "That'll be the Scarlet Guard; said Sam.

'All this for a sheep!' gasped the Doctor.

'Do you do this on purpose?' Sam asked. 'Every time I try to ask something personal?'

They shot down a clear, bright, stone corridor, sand rasping on heated stone. It was the height of the afternoon in the city of Hyspero and too close to go dashing about. He looked at her and tossed his hair out of his eyes.

'Were you asking me something?'

'I was only asking about your journeys,' huffed Sam. 'Are you really happy in the end, always moving about?'

'Down here!' he called, turning to a dark side-alley, where they had to tiptoe madly through dank pools and across the strewn bodies of beggars who seemed to have given up the ghost.

'I dislike analysis and deconstruction and psychology and psychoanalysis, you see,' the Doctor said/all that stuff. It's just prying. That's why you don't hear me spilling out my confessions all over the place.'

'And what confessions they'd be!' Sam laughed.

'Indeed,' smiled the Doctor grimly, and stopped running. 'Maybe we can pause for breath; They couldn't hear anyone shouting after them. The blare of the horns had died away.'Do you know, sometimes - while we're on the subject of happiness - I don't think I'm ever happier than I am

when I'm running away from someone.'

'Masochist.'

'Oh, don't say that! I'll start worrying about myself. That's what I mean about analysis. Sometimes I think you're better off not knowing too much.' He leaned against a filthy wall and took a deep lungful of the fetid air.

Sam shrugged.

'Honestly, Sam, it isn't so long since I was a terrible old duffer who wouldn't tell you what was going on, would shout at you as soon as look at you, would expect you to be quiet and do what I said, and be there to untie me in cellars and scream out when you saw danger heading our way...'

'Here comes danger,' she said, as, round the corner of the empty street came the butcher and two city guards, in their flowing scarlet robes. Sam had a glimpse of their crimson finery, and also the bobbing pates of their bald heads. The guards' skin appeared to be entirely blue.

'Tattoos,' said the Doctor. "The Scarlet Guard are tattooed over every inch of their bodies. Each one different. Come on, run!'

Off they went again.

'They don't take kindly to thieves here,' said the Doctor.

'I didn't even steal that sheep! I didn't want a sheep!'

"This whole world has a literature that celebrates the daring deeds of thieves and assassins,' said the Doctor.'But only the ones who don't get caught.'

Experts at being chased, the Doctor and Sam eventually managed to shake off the guards and the butcher.

They hid in the murky doorway of a shop that dealt in old books and scrolls.'Have we escaped?' Sam gasped.

The Doctor nodded. 'If we get split up, you remember where the TARDIS is, don't you?'

She gave him a withering look.'How long have I been knocking about with you?'

He mumbled an apology and picked a faded and cracked volume from a table in the doorway.'And does travel make you happy, Ms Jones?'

'I wondered if places and faces started to look the same in the end. You've been round the block a few times.'

'If I ever get bored; he said, 'I'll let you know.'

They stood in the stifling heat, looking at each other. The air smelled of ancient, sun-bleached paper. The Doctor thought about telling his companion where vellum came from. How they skinned calves ripped fresh from the uterus. How it took fourteen to make a single, precious volume. How this small shop must crowd with the unquiet souls of unborn cows. Sam would sympathise. Then he saw that she was in no mood to be lectured on interesting topics. He sighed. She so rarely was these days.

'You never answer anything, do you?'

'To be honest, I think I've forgotten half the things I've got myself into.' He was examining the book in his hands. Its binding was the colour of dried blood. He sniffed it and got a whiff of sand and dust.'It's an adventure story,' he said, frowning. "This shop seems very good value. This is very cheap.' Then he remembered he had no money. He smacked his forehead with his palm.

Then Sam realised that in all his exertions he hadn't even worked up a sweat.'And all my presents! Lost in the street.' Sam knew he would never have got round to delivering them. She felt a twinge for him, at the way he couldn't hang on to anything. And yet he was such a hoarder. She asked,'What's the book?'

Just lately he was going through a phase of buying books wherever they went, and carrying them back to the TARDIS, piling them up on every available surface in the already cluttered console room. And yet it was months since she had seen him sit down and actually read anything. He just collected them, and enjoyed arranging them on tables and chairs. Maybe he read them when she wasn't around. She had to admit, she wasn't the easiest person to read with. Sam always grew restless, and

wanted to be chatting or going out somewhere. She wanted to ask him if, in the future, anyone developed some kind of syringe with which you could inject information, books, knowledge. Maybe not.

'It's just called Aja'ib . It's a book of strange marvels.' He picked a chapter at random and read. 'In which our hapless hero travels to the lost city under the sea, seduces the sea witch, kills the king, and unleashes the power of the giant white bird that controls the passing of time.'

Sam snorted. "That's ridiculous.'

He looked perplexed.'I wish I'd saved some money.'

'Steal it.'

'Sam,I can't!'

She looked around. No sign of the shopkeeper. The small shop appeared to be completely empty. Its secluded interior sent a shiver through her. Anything could be lurking inside. She seized the battered volume from his grasp and tucked it into her haversack. 'Be a devil. Call it a present.'

As they moved briskly away, up the street, the Doctor looked scandalised. Now they really were thieves. He wondered if the city guards were circulating their descriptions already. He had heard some terrible things about the Scarlet troopers. His last few sojourns here had been surprisingly unhectic and he hadn't run up against the tattooed men. Maybe it was time to move on.

Night fell gently over the city of Hyspero, and the Doctor led the way to a vantage point high on the city walls. Mortar crumbled under their feet. The ancient bricks rattled as they climbed and the steps seemed less than safe. In the quiet the Doctor found himself more at ease again. This was an extremely old city, on an ancient world. As always in places of great age, he felt himself mentally basking in the place - soaking up its antiquity.

From here they could watch the pink light dwindle and fade over the ramshackle towers and palaces, holy places and shanty towns. The city's pointlessly intricate streets grew darker and they seemed to become empty and still. It was almost as if a curfew was in effect. The

streets became great canyons. Nothing stirred.

Then, gradually, lamps were lit, threading the city in a vague, glimmering coherence. The city of Hyspero was coming to life again, with the various businesses of the night.

The Doctor and Sam sat high on the city walls, their backs against rock still warm from the sun. They feasted on figs and peaches and pomegranates that had managed to survive intact in his pockets. They watched the people of the night in all their finery begin to traipse the pavements, carrying with them paper globes with candles inside. It was as if some great festival was taking place.Weird music issued from every shrouded doorway. Beings of every sort danced in the roadways, but not in the concerted and carefree jamboree of a Mardi Gras. Each of the night people seemed to be dancing to their own erratic tune, and up to their own affair. It was a strange sight that the Doctor and Sam took in that night. An air of surreptitious glee had overtaken the streets. Other offworlders were out and about, too, they noticed, evidently partaking of the streets' heady air of vice. Hyspero was famed in this sector as the place for finding absolutely anything you might desire, hi some quadrants they called it the world that invented desire. When the Doctor told Sam this she was quite surprised at him. He always seemed so wholesome to her. She laughed and he blushed.

They were quiet together for a while, simply savouring the evening. The Doctor flipped idly through the book Sam had stolen for him. Sam found herself itching to be back down in the city, and seeing what the locals got up to. The burgeoning excitement on the wafting, spice-laden night breezes was infectious.

"This is all about a terrible rogue,' he said tutting.'He calls up the devil in this story! Gives everyone the runaround. Then he draws evil monsters from the sea. They have the heads of fish and the bodies of men. He enlists monsters and rogues and djinn to destroy his hated, perfect brother. Who always -' the Doctor smiled - 'manages to escape scot-free.'

Sam managed a polite smile. She wasn't interested in adventure stories just now. She remembered the time, a couple of weeks ago, when they'd been hanging around between stopping-off points for hours. The Doctor had sat on the high-backed chair with his feet on the console, idly flipping through Marvel comics. It turned out he was a bigX-Men fan. Sam had grown infuriated with him, stifled by the dusty air aboard the

ship. Just lately it had seemed as if he didn't want to get involved in anything more perilous than stories. She ate the last of the fruit, sucked the juice off her fingers and looked across at him.

The Doctor was completely absorbed in his ancient text. He kept saying,'Listen to this bit!' and reading aloud. Not for the first time Sam suspected the Doctor had a sly liking for the out-and-out villains of this world. 'Now he's sold his good brother to his worst enemy! Iron automata possessed by evil spirits!'

As it grew darker still Sam tried to draw him out of the book.'Did you say this whole planet was desert, apart from this city?'

Absently he shook his head. 'Geographically, the whole place is a bit of a dog's dinner. Take a look.' He threw her what seemed to be an old hanky. It was a map of the entire world, drawn on a scrap of faded cloth. It was a very vague map. She pocketed it.

'I might climb down and have a look about,' she said. She stood up, silently defying him to stop her. There wasn't a word from him. She kicked at his boot. Nothing. She made a decision. She'd explore the other side of the city wall, the other side of the one they had climbed up.

'Hm?'

'I'm going to stretch my legs.'

'Good idea.' He turned the page.'Don't do anything I wouldn't.'

She rolled her eyes and shinned down the crumbling wall, arriving below in one more dark alleyway. Well, she thought, dusting herself down, and wincing at yet more nasty abrasions: excitement here I come. Give me vice, give me scandal. Give me the world that invented desire.

The streets here were dark and quiet. Maybe the fun had already been and gone. Sam set off at a run down the alleyway. She was determined.

If something was going on tonight in Hyspero, she was going to be part of it.

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The Doctor drew up his knees and carried on reading, squinting at the

page by moonlight.Where was he? Oh yes, back with the iron automata. They could belch fire, it appeared, and fry their opponents on the spot. And within each automaton there dwelt, hidden from the world, an evil and bitter djinn, determined to wreak havoc everywhere. He frowned. Maybe it was a bad idea to let Sam go poking around alone. And yet, just recently, he had been determined not to be too pushy and protective. She wasn't a schoolgirl any more. He was here for her. She knew where she was. She had to be allowed to make her own mistakes. Oh, Doctor, he cursed himself. Why do you allow young women to accompany you all the time? And headstrong ones at that? All this time, all these assistants, and he still never knew the best way to go about these things. Above all, though, he knew one thing. No matter how much trouble Sam could get herself into, that was nothing compared with the bother there would be if he tried to prevent her.

And anyway, this was Hyspero. The two of them had been to far more dangerous places than this.

Chapter Two
I Was a Charmer

Sam wandered. It was something she liked to do in a new place to clear her head. She never worried about getting lost. Her mother used to say to her, 'You've got a tongue in your head, haven't you? You can ask.' Really, though, her mother had been talking about getting lost in shopping centres on Saturday afternoons. The point remained, though, that she wasn't helpless even if she did get lost. And she had the map, too, although that didn't seem much cop.

This side of the city walls the alleys were narrower and slimier. This was the part of the city that the tourists weren't supposed to see, she thought. There were no gently luminous globes of light here, no paper streamers and no exotic street theatre. Here the streets wound about themselves more intricately than any she had seen, as if their purpose was to trap you for ever and keep you here. It was a neglectful, doleful part of town.

Sam found herself taking one of the Doctor's many nuggets of advice, and rationalised her progress. Since she didn't have an endless piece of string, or even an unfeasibly long scarf to unwind, she paid close attention to the route she adopted. She took only left turnings, until she came to a dead end, and then she took a right. Surely that would be easy enough to remember and reverse.

It was curiously quiet, but she was sure she didn't have the place to herself. It looked like the sort of place where the goings-on were all indoors. Ratty old curtains covered each black doorway and, as she passed, she was sure she saw some of them twitch - greedy eyes in the dark giving her sidelong glances... she shook her head and hurried on. Now she was just making herself nervous.

She turned into a street that terminated in a fat, white, ramshackle temple. It had an organic look about it, like a domed and bulging skull that had at some time split and extruded various excrescences. The whole abandoned facade gave out a peculiarly melancholy air. Sam was sure she had wandered into the least promising street in the city.

Somehow, though, the ugly temple drew her on as if coaxing her. There was something there that she was meant to search out and discover. A little voice, somewhere, was urging her on. She'd become used to daring herself like that - lately. She was quite superstitious about not taking up

her own challenges.

Sam crossed the dusty street and came under the dense shade of the temple. She held her breath and slipped between the crumbling, scrawled-over pillars, into a moonlit courtyard beyond. It was like stepping into a different world. Here was classicism, purity, calm. This was the kind of experience a traveller was supposed to have, she thought with satisfaction. This was unheard-of places, this was hidden treasures. This small, beautiful oasis was hers alone. Dark trees rustled and flattened themselves against the cool stone. She could hear water lapping and pushing against rock. She stepped out into the moonlight.

At the edge of a stagnant green pool an old beggar had built himself a small fire. So she had to share this place after all. He was a native of the world, with the wide-eyed, melancholic face she was getting used to seeing here. His mane of white hair hung in ribbons down his chest over filthy robes, which he used to wipe his fingers on as he sat there, working quite fastidiously in the glaring light. Sam thought about dodging past and going on her way, pretending that her solitude had never been impeached, but the old man looked straight up at her. She couldn't help but jump. Those Hysperon eyes seemed able to look straight into you. They could see your every desire. It figures, thought Sam. This was, after all, the world that claimed to have invented the word. The eyes she found staring her out were filled with longing. Sam was transfixed for a moment.

He was roasting on a spit something that was shrivelled and blackened and looked oddly like a snake. In the quiet she could even hear its shriven, blistered skin crackle and pop. There was a hiss of burning fat dropping into the flames. The smell was foul. He held her gaze and when he spoke it was in a shrill, wheedling tone that made her distrust him immediately. 'Have you come to eat with me?' he said. 'Would you take an old man's last meal?'

'No, thanks,' she shuddered.

'I am Brewis,' he said.'It's a long time since anyone visited my temple.'

'Your temple?'

He shrugged. 'No one else wanted it. I don't belong here really,' he confided.'I'm an offworlder.'

Sam found herself staring at his dirty, matted beard. To her he looked like a Hysperon native through and through. Still, let him think what he liked. For some reason she found herself having a whole conversation with him. Being around the Doctor again was making her more talkative. 'Me too. My friend, the Doctor says most people on Hyspero are just passing through here, to see the sights and get themselves involved in -'

Brewis tossed his head and snorted. He was starting to get on Sam's nerves. She hated being interrupted. 'We arrive thinking we've found the place to make our fortunes. The planet where all our secret desires are to be uncovered and fulfilled. So we come from all nine corners of the cosmos. Scoundrels, for the most part.'

'And what were you, Brewis?'

He looked despondent.'I was an entertainer. I was a charmer.'

Sam laughed.'I bet you were.'

'Of snakes.'

There was a pitiful bleat and the same black sheep Sam had accidentally rescued that afternoon emerged from the shadows. She couldn't believe it. It stood there and returned her glance and gave what she was sure was an ironic little mew.

'It's following me, that thing,' said Sam. She decided it was time to go now. Hyspero wasn't living up to the hype at all. 'Anyway. I must get back to the Doctor.'

'You go back to the Doctor,' nodded the old man. He was tweezing a piece of white snake flesh off the spit. He coaxed the curious sheep to try some.'Don't hang around in this temple longer than you have to. Or among the graves. The graves here belong to the dregs of the world. You're rubbing shoulders with the lowest of the low.'

'I'm quite used to that, honestly.'

'The graveyards are protected by spirits, by djinn.You wouldn't want to come across one of them on a dark night.'

Sam stared. The sheep was actually eating the cooked snakemeat from the old man's fingers. It had tiny, viciously pointed teeth.

'Yeah,' she said, moving off. 'I'll watch out.'

She left him to it, and hurried away from the stench of burning fat. But something stopped her from leaving the way she came in. She hadn't seen all she wanted to see.

She took the first open archway out of the ruined temple and found herself in one corner of a maze. Monuments, pillars and half-tumbled walls crammed in to confuse her. Rough gravestones lay everywhere. There didn't seem room enough to have buried that many names under the hard-packed, grassless soil. She edged between stones and walls, and wished she'd come out the way she'd gone in. She thought about the old man warning her of evil spirits, and decided to put it out of her mind. She thought about the Doctor, happily reading his book up on the city walls. She resisted wishing that she'd stayed there with him. He'd become complacent recently. Haunting places like this is exactly what he would have done before. She was only doing his usual stuff, and he never came to much harm, did he?

At least the silence was less eerie. These graveyards - which were more like a junkyard, with everything shunted together and piled up like this - must back on to a busy, night-time street. When she listened more closely she was certain that she could hear hawkers and vendors calling out, the cries and laughter of a drunken crowd, music from bars and clubs. She could even hear fireworks. Maybe. Maybe they were quite close. Sounds of, if not normality, at least life. She followed the source of this noise. She'd rather be in danger among the living than the dead.

A thought struck her. Maybe she could make use of the fireworks. They were the gaudiest, most potent she had ever seen. The sky was lit up gold and silver for whole seconds at a time, turning the city roofs from black to yellow, into a weird near-daylight. Sam hauled herself on to a flat-roofed mausoleum, one that stood as tall as she did, and waited for the city to illuminate itself. Then she would figure out her route, in the few seconds of exposure. Off it went. She gasped.

She was none the wiser about how to get out. But in the glare of mercurial light she had seen the last thing she had expected.

Against the railings at what must be the back of the graveyard there stood a familiar-looking vehicle.

It was battered and dirty and its windows were pitch dark. Some of them were smashed. But it looked very much like a London bus. A double-decker the colour of tomato ketchup. Perhaps it was a relic, an antique, or something transported from Earth as a kind of joke. It was the last thing she expected to see here. It even made her feel a bit nostalgic. When she jumped off the massive grave and stumbled round to the front of the bus, she saw that it was the number twenty-two. The sign, black on white - now it really was beginning to make her feel homesick - said it was headed for Putney Common.

As she approached the bus she saw that there was absolutely no way it could have been driven into that corner of the graveyard. There just wasn't any room. Either it had been dropped from a great height, for some bizarre reason, or the graves had been sunk around it, hemming it into place. The red double-decker stood there inscrutably, like a monument itself, defying any reason she might apply to it.

Now, at last, this was something worth checking out.

Her heart was beating faster. She gripped her rucksack harder.

No time like the present. No point in going back to fetch the Doctor. He'd only do what she was about to do. He'd only clamber aboard and poke around and announce his presence loudly. She could do that by herself.

From the temple behind her there came a howl of dismay. It cut off quite suddenly and then started up again, changing and dwindling into a kind of gurgle. The old man. It had to be him.Yet for some reason this only spurred her on. There was no way she was going back to see what he had done to himself. Sam hauled herself aboard the bus.

The doors concertinaed open gladly before her, at the slightest pressure of her fingers. How stale the air was inside. The moonlight penetrated even here, but she could pick out only the vaguest shapes of what lay within. She could tell that this was no ordinary bus. She stared into the gloom.

The bus rocked slightly beneath her weight, as if, somehow, it was sensitive to passengers. And, as she stepped lightly down the gangway, its lights flickered, coughed and came grudgingly to life. A warm, golden light suffused the lower deck. Sam stood by the driver's cab and took it

all in.

It had been customised by an expert with expensive and peculiar taste. The leatherette seats had been ripped out and this whole downstairs was dressed up like someone's living room. An old-fashioned, over-cluttered living room, with a chintzy bed settee, a cocktail cabinet heaped with papers, charts, splayed-open novels. Curtains hung, dusty, over the windows and there were lamps everywhere which, as she stared, were still popping into life, one after the other. Beautiful Art Nouveau lamps in shards of multicoloured glass. Tassels and beads hung off everything. Bits of fancy-dress outfits were scattered haphazardly - feathers and yards of glittering fabric.

But the bus appeared to be abandoned. It was a London Transport Marie Celeste .

Sam went to the staircase and dragged herself warily up the fifteen or so stairs.

On the top deck, more of the same. It was even more crowded, with rack after rack of clothes rails. It was like being upstairs in a theatrical costumier's. More dresses and outfits hung over the windows. Oddly, among some of the tops and coats and odd shoes and ripped pairs of tights, there were fragments of circuitry, of half-repaired chunks of sophisticated electronics.

Sam turned to go.

'Wait!' pleaded a thick, resonant voice.

Sam started - but tried not to show her surprise.

'Who is it?' she said, cross at herself for thinking first of all of the djinn and malevolent spirits the old man had mentioned.

'At the front... of this vehicle.' The voice sounded disgusted and resigned.'I've been held prisoner here for three days.'

She squeezed past the rails of the clothes, pulling them aside on their casters, and fighting through a particularly heavy mass of fur coats. One from every kind of exotic cat, it seemed, and none of them fake.

At the front of the bus, lying doubled up on the floor in the securest of chains, lay a man.

'You're just a girl,' he spat. 'And I don't suppose you brought a hacksaw?'

Sam didn't say a word. She reached into her bag and drew out a fine-toothed blade. She had kept this with her these past few weeks, deciding that the Doctor's sonic screwdriver was useless on anything heavy-duty. They seemed to have been thrown into cellars quite a lot just lately. She thought she ought to check who this bloke was before she freed him.

He was impatient. 'Forget the introductions, sweetheart. Just get me out.'

She couldn't see an awful lot of him in the murky light. She decided what was required was a bargain. 'If I let you out, you owe me one. I'm Sam.'

He glowered at her. His eyes were narrow, baleful, green. His flesh, now that she looked closely, was thick and scaled, a bland, anaemic white. His whole body was covered. He wore a pair of ruined overalls and his sinuous body, with that cracked skin, was curled almost into a ball.'I'm Gila,' he muttered.

'You've been like this for three days?'

He sighed.'An awful old witch trapped me like this. I don't know what for.' He tried to sound more pleading. 'Won't you free me?' Yet he couldn't keep that arrogance out of his voice. He had a slight lisp, too, which sounded mocking to Sam.

She thought about getting to work on freeing him, then thought better of it. 'I've got a friend who can help,' she said, straightening up. She pushed the small, broken saw blade into his more flexible hand.'See if you can make a start...' Then she backed away from him.

He moaned.'Come back! Just free me yourself!'

Sam shook her head.'I don't think so.'

'Don't go! What's your name?'

'Sam. I told you. Look... I'm going for the Doctor.'

'I don't need a doctor, Sam!' he called, and started to break up into horrible laughter. 'I just need you!' As Sam hurried back down the

staircase his laughter turned to a coughing fit and racking sobs.

Now she had to hurry back and find the Doctor.

What was she going to tell him? In a graveyard she'd found a double-decker bus and aboard there was a lizard man held captive. The Doctor would despair of her.

She trod carefully back through the graves and into the temple. She didn't want to meet the old man, Brewis, again.

As she went by, however, she could see him lying by the light of his failing fire. He must be asleep. That black sheep was nuzzling at his chin. When it looked up at her approach, the creature gave a warning bleat, then it shot off into the dark. That was when Sam saw it had been gobbling down the thin, slippery innards of the old man's throat. She turned away with a cry and hurried out of the temple.

Now to reverse her steps through the streets.

The streets were busier. They teemed with entertainers, storytellers, jugglers, fire-walkers, bandits, whores, cobblers, astrologers, beggars and bear tamers. They seemed to be different streets from those she had walked not an hour since. It was as if, at a predetermined time, someone had opened a box and this rabble had emerged. There were more offworlders in the crowd after dark, too, as if they found it safer all of a sudden to be in this remoter part of town. There were a few alien race-types she recognised, all of them, she was certain, up to no good. And yet, now, she hardly felt there was time to take it all in.

And then, abruptly, she was at the sheer wall down which she had slithered. Funny, but it wasn't exactly where she thought it had been.

But this was it, all right. When she drew back and looked up at the ragged silhouette of the city walls, there was the Doctor. He sat in exactly the same position, with the book against his knees. She watched him run one distracted hand through his hair and quickly turn a page. She whistled at him. 'Come on down, Doctor! You're missing everything!'

She heard him give a rueful laugh. He stood and yawned and stretched, sliding theAja'ib into one of his capacious coat pockets.

'Tell me, Sam,' his dark silhouette asked. 'Would you by any chance

have embroiled the pair of us in something rather dangerous?'

She grinned. 'What would you say if I had?'

'I'd say well done! There's only so long I can read about people having adventures without wanting to get up to some malarkey myself...' He slid off the roof and down the wall in one apparently easy movement. But he twisted his ankle when he hit the densely packed earth in the alley. Sam had to support him as he howled.

'What is it, then?' he said at last, crossly.'What have you found for me?'

'Can you walk?'

'Of course I can walk!'He tested his weight on his foot and grimaced. 'Don't go haring ahead, though. Well?'

She started to lead the way. 'I found someone held captive. But he looks a bit dangerous. I didn't want to free him by myself.'

'Where is he?'

'In a graveyard.'

'Delightful. Ow!'

'Doctor, do you believe in evil spirits?'

'Of course I do. Why?'

'Nothing. Listen, he's trapped in a double-decker bus, on the top deck, and it's -'

'He's on a what?' The Doctor stopped in his tracks.

'A bus. And the sign on the front says it's the number twenty-two to Putney Common.'

The Doctor let out a low, hissing breath. 'Iris, you old devil.'

'Who?'

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More interference. This camera cost a fortune.You'd think it would have neater edits than this. Between every shot there are crackles and bangs and flashes of white lightning. Cut to: the Lizard Man, the Alligator Man, the scabrous-hided Gila reclining on a sola at the back of the bus. Behind him the dusty road spools away endlessly. He looks tired and cross and tries to hide his face behind a cushion.

'Iris, I don't want to be filmed now, all right? What do you expect me to say? That I'm having a lovely time? I'm here under duress! I'd never be here if it wasn't for you. I've left a whole life behind in Hyspero. All my... business interests, my schemes and plans - 'I'll be losing a fortune coming out here on this crack-brained scheme. I've retired from the whole business of running about the place and rescuing people. And you've ruined my retirement. I had my life sorted out. I was comfortable. It's all gone to the dogs now, I bet, and it's all because of you.'

Off screen there is a raucous cackle.'Good!' somebody laughs, before the screen goes dark.

Chapter Three
She Was Never Without Her Enchantments

Maybe he had mellowed, but when he thought about Iris these days, he didn't feel quite so hostile. Once upon a time she had seemed to him a meddlesome, foolish, prattling old woman. And he had told her so on numerous occasions. Their paths had continued to cross over the years and some of the Doctors of old had lost their patience with her. Yet now - only now - the Doctor looked back at Iris with something approaching fondness.

It had been a long time. So perhaps he had mellowed after all. Or maybe the intervening years had been so fraught he was able to see Iris for what she had always been: harmless, funny, a dilettante and shameless philanderer.

All the way to the graveyard the Doctor refused to answer Sam's questions. He found that he was starting to relish the thought of seeing Iris again. He couldn't even remember what the last encounter had been. Unhappy, at any rate. He seemed to recall their parting under a cloud. He wished his memory wasn't so poor. Sometimes when he tried to reach back into previous lives it was like recalling something told to him, a dream, or a book he once read. It made him feel very young. Dwarfed by the magnitude of his life. Sometimes it wasn't worth the mental effort, trying to drag his waking thoughts to a point before Skaro, London, San Francisco, Lungbarrow... Just let the past come to you when it will, he thought. That's the best way. Because, in the end, it always will.

Strange that it should come in the form of Iris Wildthyme. his the itinerant journal-keeper and dogger of the Doctor's footsteps. She had known all of his incarnations, known them all. His past would be more real to her than it was to him. She loved to reminisce. Perhaps that was why he was glad she was here on Hyspero.

'I was in love with you, you fool!' he remembered her yelling once. For years she had kept that tight little secret down, exploding once and yelling at him in a forest in the middle of the night. She knew it was all impossible, however. No matter how many outbursts and revelations she made. Since that particular admission the Doctor had been warier of her than ever before. Sometimes she overpowered him with her raffish brio. He came away from each of their intermittent encounters somewhat shaken. Here was the bus.

'Charming spot, Sam,' he smiled. 'You bring me to the nicest places.' The lights on the bus were blazing now. It looked almost cosy aboard. He remembered being on board that bus and felt a flash of what was almost nostalgia. Christmas dinner with Iris, Tegan and Turlough. One of their happier meetings.

The Doctor asked, 'You say there was no sign of an oldish woman, a bit dressed up, about so high?'

Sam shook her head.'You know who this belongs to, don't you?' He bit his lip and nodded.'But the Iris I knew would never leave her bus unlocked like this.' He sighed. 'Something dreadful must have happened;

Iris had always been so ridiculously proud of her TARDIS. It had amused him, her pleasure and pride. He remembered the first time he had been allowed to come aboard. And that had happened only because she was so drunk she couldn't see herself home. He had carried her home through a forest and, when he at last climbed aboard her bus, he burst out laughing. Her TARDIS was exactly the same size inside as out. That was why she was reluctant to let him aboard. Sam asked him,'Who is she?'

'She's a menace,' he said. 'How long have you known her?'

'I can't tell. She keeps popping up through all my lives. It's very confusing and she knows a lot more about me than I know about her.' Sam was none the wiser. She led the way on to the bus. 'Everything is the same here,' he said thoughtfully. Hardly a thing had been moved since the last time he encountered Iris. There were a few extra ornaments: a Spanish lady twirling her skirts on the minibar, and a lava lamp, which burbled picturesquely to itself. So her taste hadn't improved, he thought. Old Iris was the same, and look at all the things that had happened to him in recent years!

He turned to the driver's cab, peering into the instrument panels and popping on his glasses. The controls were similar to those in his own TARDIS - the same mixture of teak, brass and Formica. Bulbous lights blinked on and off, dials flickered and nudged. A glaring display read,

HYSPERO.ABBASID ERA. THIRD DECADE.

Sam was peering over his shoulder. "This is a TARDIS!' she gasped.

'She's a Time Lord!'

He smirked. 'Well, Iris would never thank you for calling her a Time Lady, at any rate. That sounds much too genteel for her. Let's say that she claims to come from my world. She's very, very evasive.'

"That's the pot calling the kettle -'

He riddled with a few switches. 'I wonder if her ship can find her... They home, you know. Like pigeons.'

The driver's cab looked particularly abandoned. There was a cassette player set into the dashboard, squeezed into a gap where the dimensional stabilisers ought to be. A few old tapes were scattered: Motown, Abba, Shirley Bassey. He could picture Iris sitting at the wheel, having to pilot her ship manually through the space-time vortex. What a faff all that would be. He didn't envy her. In his Ship it was quite enough work, just setting coordinates and sitting back to wait with a cup of tea. At least he didn't have to drive. He could see Iris here, with music blaring out, wearing her thickest, rattiest fur coat, its collar pulled right up around her neck, because the chilling Time Winds would come creeping and shushing aboard, through the gaps round windows and under the bus's hydraulic doors. This ship wasn't very safe at all. Bless her heart - grimly clutching her steering wheel, juddering and shivering on the slippery upholstery, prey to the dizzying horrors of the vortex. Poor old thing. No wonder she liked to have a house in every port, every world, every time zone she visited. She collected homes like the Doctor collected companions. 'She proposed to me once, you know,' he said. 'She did?'

'In Venice. It was very romantic. I can't remember what stage I was at just then, what face I was wearing - but I was flabbergasted. She proposed at dawn, on the Bridge of Sighs. She was vast then, a huge woman in her late sixties, with a rope of white hair that trailed along behind her. When people tripped on it she would turn and shout at them.'

'She sounds amazing.'

'I suppose she is. She scared the living daylights out of me.'

'You should have said yes.'

'She was like Collette,' he mused. 'You could see that she had been very beautiful in her youth, and she couldn't let go of that. She was caked in

white pan-stick and rouge and the purplest lipstick. Terribly glamorous, as if she'd spent years upon the stage. And because she still carried herself like a great beauty, she was.'

'What was that?' Sam pointed to something out of the window.

'Hm?'

'Something's moving out there.'

'Oh dear. It's a graveyard, isn't it?'

'Some old beggar was telling me about evil spirits among the graves.' She shuddered.

The Doctor peered through the window. There was definitely movement out there, between the dark slabs of stone and the tortured-looking trees.

'Djinn,' said the Doctor.

'That's what the old man said.You mean it's true?'

'You get them all over this world. Not spirits, exactly. Ghouls who come out to eat the flesh of the dead.'

Sam drew back from the window. I'll shut the doors.'

'Tickets, please!' called the Doctor.'I wouldn't have minded being a bus conductor. You get to see the world. No monsters, no megalomaniacs...'

'No flesh-eating ghouls.'

'Ifrits, they call them.' He ticked them off on his fingers. 'Ifrits, which are ghouls; djinn, which are more like spirits; qutrub, which you might call werewolves, really, and kabikaj, and they are spirits with control over the insect world. They could set a plague of locusts on you, or -'

'You've brought me somewhere horrible again!'

He looked hurt. 'I think Hyspero is a sensational planet.' She tutted. 'Have you been bored yet?'

"That's not the point!'

'I think we should go and take a look at this captive of yours.'

There was a sudden thudding noise as that captive came down the stairs from the top deck.

'I take it you're Gila,' said the Doctor, going up to shake his hand.

The captive ignored him. He glared at Sam.'You took your time.' Then he started to inspect the whitened scales of his body. He was covered from head to toe. Some kind of genetic mutation, the Doctor thought. 'My skin looks terrible,' said Gila. 'She's kept me away from water.' He looked around.'Have you found her?'

'Who,' said Sam.'The witch that kept you prisoner?'

'He called her a witch, did he?'

'How else could she keep me,' moaned Gila,'without enchantments?'

'Iris was never without her enchantments,' the Doctor smiled.'But she isn't a witch.' Gila muttered.'Do you know where she is?'

'No,' spat Gila.

The Doctor suddenly felt unsettled. Here he was, once more aboard her ship, with all her gaudy, silly things about him, and yet somehow he didn't expect to see her again in the flesh.

'Doctor!' Sam let out a great yell."They're all around us!'

They had been attracted by the unusual lights of the bus. Pallid, soft-bodied, bluish-coloured creatures like this weren't used to warm, friendly lights. They circled the vehicle gradually, muttering and chittering to themselves. Their noise grew greater as those above the bus realised they were being watched.

'Ifrits,' said the Doctor.

They brushed against the windows. Soft tattered flesh and leathery wings slid by. Once or twice Sam caught a glimpse of a chattering death's head. The eyes were lidless and puzzled-looking, gazing

moonily at her.'Can we fight them off?'

"They won't harm you; said Gila lazily. 'I've sat in here night after night, locked in chains, and nothing bad happened to me.'

'All the same,' said the Doctor.'I don't like being stared at by zombies.'

'We aren't dead!' said GUa.'They aren't interested in us!'

The Doctor was at work on the snip's console.'I'm trying to home in on Iris. Her telepathic circuits work beautifully... Ah, there she is! She's alive, everyone!'

'Hooray,' said Gila caustically, and glared at the ghouls swishing by outside.

'Are we going to follow her?' asked Sam.

He nodded, touched a few controls decisively, and the whole bus slid sideways into the vortex.

'At least we can't see those things now,' Sam said.

'Hold on tight, everyone,' said the Doctor.'I'm not sure how accurate her-'

They re-entered real time at the top of a great, steep hill, overlooking the desert. It was still night-time and as hot as an oven.

'She's here somewhere,' said the Doctor, once everything was still and all the wheezing and groaning was over.

'This is an amazing machine!' said Gila.

'It's nippy,' said the Doctor sniffily. 'I prefer my own, though.' He pulled a TV monitor down from the ceiling of the cab. It came on a snaking, unsafe-looking cable. He twiddled a few knobs and the picture hissed into life. Black and white, like an old Saturday matinee. 'Maybe we can find out why Iris has started kidnapping young men. Ah, here's a picture.'

The desert. It was what lay immediately outside, shown in smeary infrared. The scene resolved itself, and showed three colossal dogs guarding a hole someone had dug in the desert. They pawed the sand and growled, bearing their slobbery fangs in the moonlight.

"That's where she is,' said the Doctor. 'At the bottom of that pit.'

Chapter Four
After All I've Survived!

She was a woman used to being quite alone. For many years she had travelled by herself, considering herself to be excellent company, the best she could ever hope for. Her own jokes made her laugh, she had wonderful taste in music, art, clothes, food, wines, poetry, prose and places, she always made the appropriate comment, and had the most precise and pertinent quotation to hand. Any possible companion wouldn't stand a chance against the qualities she perceived in herself.

Once or twice she had tried out an assistant, to share expenses and nervous energy, to lighten the spiritual and psychological load on the longer, lonelier hauls through time and space. But these people, once invited aboard her TARDIS, only ended up getting on her nerves. And she on theirs, she didn't wonder. They had been humans for the most part, and she deplored their limitations. Their endless what-do-we-do-nows and their come-and-rescue-me's. And for a while she had travelled with an obtuse shape-shifter who loved nothing better than to spend much of his time as a tippy and garrulous penguin.

In recent years Iris had been alone.

There was, however, one companion she had always longed for. One she had desired with both her hearts ever since the earliest of her voyages. That being whose own peripatetic career rivalled and was so oddly parallel to her own. Whose adventures took him in such similar directions to hers, and whose peril-strewn path she had sometimes purposefully crossed.

He was here, somewhere on Hyspero. There was something in the air. She could sense him nearby.

And yet he wasn't here to rescue her. So near and so far.

Never had she felt more dismally alone than this - pitched into a well sunk deep into the crumbling sandstone of the desert. She wondered how stable the rock might be, what its condition was. Gloomily she imagined things getting much worse, and a grand crevasse opening up beneath her stout walking boots, and burying her for ever in the desert's bowels. But that was no good. Think on the bright side, Iris.

She was so deep in the ground the night sky was reduced to the size of a Hysperon coin. If she craned her neck she could still see the fierce blue of the sky and the mocking glimmer of its stars. She sat despondently at the bottom of the hole and wept bitterly through the night.

Soon, she thought, I'll starve and that will be the end of everything. After all I've survived! Giant spiders on Metebelis Three, the Cybermen tombs of Telos, the Drashigs in feeding frenzy on their fetid swamp world.

She cringed when she heard one of the dogs above baying at the moon. The other two pitched in. So they were still there. Even if she managed to climb out she'd be ripped to pieces by ravenous hounds. They reminded her of the dogs in the tale by Hans Christian Andersen - the dogs that guarded the old witch's treasure, with eyes as big as cartwheels to keep watch in the night.

Then she remembered: she had a bar of chocolate in her handbag. Kept for emergencies. She ripped into it.

I'm lucky I've got my journal with me, she thought.

Iris wrote in thick, coloured hardcover books, on creamy unlined paper. She had hundreds already filled with her crabbed handwriting, her densely allusive and florid prose. Her current volume was a relatively new one, beginning with notes stolen in a free moment during her recent escape from Xeraphas. The text picked up again with her arrival in bustling, sweltering Hyspero, a week ago.

***

She was sitting in a cafe in the capital city, fans swooshing coolly above her head, a glass pitcher of iced coffee set before her. She stirred the thick froth and the ice cubes in the pitcher and looked at the brief list she had made.

The alligator man.

A cyborg.

That bearded lady.

A mock turtle.

Iris stared out into the street for a full ten minutes. The colourful crowd swept by and she barely took in a single detail.

I have my instructions, she wrote, and never was I more leery about setting out on a jaunt. Never have I embarked with greater trepidation or, indeed, the express purpose of depriving others of their liberty.

Never mind who they were. The proposition is antithetical to my whole being. No way would I ever be involved in such a dubious enterprise unless I was desperate. And let's face it, I'm desperate. So I have my instructions.

This iced coffee's a bit tepid.

And let's ignore the fact that I'm terrified of the woman for whom I find myself working. I've met some chilling personalities in my time. Foes that would make your hair curl. I'm not exaggerating when I say that the Scarlet Empress gives me the willies.

Still and all, I have my mission. I know what I have to do. I just have to get on with it. If I succeed, then I have nothing to fear from the Empress. I am hoping for quite the opposite. I am bargaining for the greatest reward the Empress can bestow.

In the meantime I have everything I always had: my wiles, my wits, my looks.

***

That was the most recent entry in the book - apart from two scrawled addresses: 1/7 n.62 Abss. and Nilt.6.12 (back).

Iris checked her watch and saw it was time for more painkillers. Not a drop of anything to wash them down with of course. The pains were biting harder now, and the climate here and all these deprivations weren't making it any easier. She only hoped her old bones would carry her on to the end of this affair. Even supposing she escaped from this well.

Maybe he would come. He was definitely here somewhere.

***

She thought they ought to be together, simply because they both knew what it was like to live at risk. For most of their lives they had clung to the margins, inching and then zipping along the various interstices that bound the rest of the world together. They had made their homes in cafes, spacecraft, streets, offices, jungles, bookshops, volcanoes, emergency military headquarters, dungeons, deserts, gleaming control rooms and dank and dripping tunnels. They had lived by their wits and come through the most fearsomely difficult escapades.

While he had written scarcely a word about the things he got up to, there was barely an hour that Iris hadn't documented. There was nothing to remember him by, once he faded away from a place. A lingering trace, perhaps, in the dodgy memories of friends and foes. He might have set some wrongs right, or he might have caused further muddle. But he managed to efface himself.

Iris wrote it all down for him.

He was her muse, and her reader, and one day she would sit him down and make him catch up with everything she had put by for him. Then, when she had him listening at last, she could ask him what made him tick. Where did he invest his hopes? What made him truly happy? She wanted to know if he ever enjoyed himself. She was fascinated by his breakneck lifestyle, the hair-raising energy that fuelled his life - but she was even more drawn by the strange lacunae in the Doctor's life.When did he fit in the ordinary things? When did he eat, sleep, drink, read? Who did he cuddle up with at the end of the day?

No wonder that miraculous Ship of his had hidden dimensions and pocket infinities. That was where he hid all the things that he didn't want anyone to see. A kind of Freudian transdimensionalism, to use an allusion to his favourite planet.

In a way Iris considered herself the very opposite to him. She embraced the very ordinary things, and celebrated them. They were what she had left stifling Gallifrey for. She wanted the stink and the swelter of the everyday. And she blessed the Latin poet Terence who said, 'Nothing human is alien to me.'

Iris suspected that everything human was alien to the Doctor. Whereas she had no end of appetites.

Here she was, the most vital, colourful, intelligent, beautiful and fullest-figured woman on the planet and she was starving in a pit with no one to talk to.

She upended her handbag and groped around for cigarettes. The first lungful was, as ever, bliss. She watched the indigo smoke describe arabesques in the dusky air.

It would rise as a perfect, narrow column and climb effortlessly out of the hole where she was trapped. Her smoke, blown like a kiss, would slip blithely past the three hounds that guarded her at the gates of hell. Her smoke would pall gently above the desert, overseeing the vast stretches of wasted land, his didn't really enjoy empty places. The city, the boulevards, the seething highways - these were her natural spaces. Her cigarette smoke would rise above it all and hang like a djinn, able to survey the whole of glittering, corrupt Hyspero to the west, the listing towers of the palace of the Scarlet Empress in the north, and to the south, and the cragged, hazardous mountain range she had pledged to traverse. It was as she was stubbing that cigarette out on a rock that she heard the kerfuffle above ground. The dogs had gone wild. Someone had come to rescue her.

***

More desert. An exterior view of the livid red bus. A bulky figure in an old coat is scrubbing at the dusty windows with a handkerchief. The green fur collar of her coat hides her face. The camera wobbles, zooms in. We see she wears Jackie O sunglasses and her vividly lipsticked mouth is pursed in concentration. She grins into the camera and sticks out her tongue. Then she peers over her glasses. 'Getting your own back, Sam! Well, I don't mind being filmed. I never
did:

Sam's voice comes from off screen. 'If we're meant to be keeping a watch out for the Scarlet Guard, shouldn't we be travelling in something less conspicuous than a London bus?'

'I wouldn't go anywhere without my ship. She's my only consolation. And anyway -' Iris grins again, her weathered face fills our screen - 'I think conspicuousness is a marvellous thing. I can't abide skulkers!'

Chapter Five
Down, Boys

The three black dogs were too busy howling at the moon to notice that the Doctor had arrived, with Sam and Gila emerging from the bus behind him.

The Doctor stuffed his hands in his pockets and wondered how he should go about this. He never was very good with dogs. And look at these ones. He gulped. They were the size of horses, and he couldn't help thinking of the hounds that ripped Actaeon apart when he came across Diana bathing in the forest. Why can't I ever think of nice Earth classical allusions? he wondered. Why always the horrible ones?

'Do we have to get past them?' asked Sam.

"That's where our objective is; said the Doctor, with a wry nod. 'See that hole there?'

'Who put her down there?' asked Sam.

'The dogs,' hissed Gila, with a nasty smile.

The Doctor could see it all now. Great brindled creatures, matted fur grown over the steel of their bodies, they had taken their orders and wouldn't be called off. Their commands had come straight from their master and, between them, they had carried the distraught, bleating Iris into this bleak stretch of desert. The rim of the dustbowl. In that graveyard they had rounded her up, snarling, and tossed her up in the air like a bundle of rags.

'They're yours, aren't they?' he said to Gila.'You set them on to her.'

Gila pulled a face, shrugged nonchalantly.

'Call off your hounds, Gila,' the Doctor's voice went hard. 'She's an old woman.' Even older than he was, he reflected. She called him 'my boy'.

'She held me at gunpoint!'

'She must have had her reasons.'

'I'd like to hear them.'

'If she's still alive, maybe she'll tell you.'

'All right.'

Gila ran down the slope to his dogs. He ploughed deep furrows in the sand as he hurried The half-mile.

'You know,'said Sam.'I wouldn't trust him the slightest bit.'Sometimes she thought the Doctor was just a bit too feckless.

'He's all right,'said the Doctor.'Shall we follow?You just have to know how to handle these people...'

Gila was calling out to his hounds. They turned their vast, red eyes on him. 'You can leave off now - go home!' His pale body seemed tiny and spindly next to theirs. They weren't listening to him.

The Doctor shouted,'What's the matter? Why won't they -'

One of the three, the largest, broke away and came bounding across the sand towards him.

'Uh, Doctor...' said Sam. 'Get back.' Sam got back.

The dog let out a howl of rage as it came hurtling up towards him. He stood in its path and, at the last moment, flung himself to the ground. The beast was too clumsy to turn and it pelted past. The other two came running to take its place. They set up a great noise, baiting him. They were playing a game, Sam thought, with the Doctor as their toy.

She ran to him and found that his head had connected with a large, flat rock when he fell. He was stunned, and there was a dribble of blood at his temple. His cravat had come undone. She shook him. They'll rip us to shreds!' she yelled.

'What's Gila doing?' asked the Doctor Wearily

'Nothing much,' she said, looking round.

All three dogs were advancing upon the pair from their separate directions.

'Down, boys,' the Doctor muttered feebly. Then he bellowed, 'Gila! Call them off! If I die you'll never know what Iris is up to.'

'Do I even care?' came Gila's mocking reply.

'Yes you do!' said the Doctor. 'And if I or Sam get the slightest scratch... then you'll never know.'

'Hold,' said Gila to his dogs, and ran towards them. In the moonlight his scales gleamed.

'Iris is rich,' said the Doctor.

'How rich?'

'Rich as Croesus. Richer than you can imagine.'

'I don't know. I can imagine quite a bit.'

There was a pause.

The Doctor said to Sam,'He'll get his comeuppance. They always do, wretches like that.'

'Do they?'

'All right.' Gila bellowed some kind of command at his dogs. They growled in protest, in disappointment, but they listened to him. Their hackles went down, they stopped glaring and pacing the ground. They turned and fled, full pelt, back to Hyspero.

Sam brushed herself down. 'Well. Attacked by giant devil dogs. The days are just packed, aren't they? How's your head?'

'Oh, all right. My ankle still hurts, though.'

She tutted and turned on Gila. 'Why didn't you call them off sooner?'

He shrugged. She felt like spitting in his eye.

The Doctor didn't bother with recriminations. He always said there wasn't time.'Let's fetch Iris up; he said with a grin.

He ran back to the boot of the bus and hunted around in her tool chest. Minutes later he was back with a long rope ladder. "The poor old thing will have to climb.'

They sent it down, unrolling it with a triumphant flourish. From deep down the well they heard a shout of pleasure. So it was long enough to reach its target.

'Iris?' the Doctor called, making his hands into a megaphone.

'Is that who I think it is?' Her voice came out distant and ghostly.

'I don't know - who do you think it is?'

And then she was silent for a full ten minutes, during which she concentrated her energies on strenuous handover-hand climbing. They peered into the darkness, holding their breaths. Her grunts and oaths were getting louder.

She emerged looking filthy, frail, battered and deliriously happy. Her wide-brimmed hat hung at a jaunty angle. She fell into the Doctor's arms without even looking at his face.

'It's me!'she cried.

***

The first thing they had to do, once Iris got her breath back, was to prevent her and Gila going for each other's throat.

'They wereyour hounds!'

'You put me in chains!'

'You wouldn't co-operate peacefully!'

'You tricked me,you hag!'

The Doctor wedged himself between them. 'Can't we sort this out nicely?'

'Honestly, Doctor,' she said, 'I thought I was done for. I thought they

were going to drag me to the Underworld.'

'Good riddance,' snarled Gila. 'Just ask her, ask her why she was taking me prisoner.'

Iris pursed her lips.

'Why, Iris?' asked the Doctor solemnly.

'I'm on a mission,' she said airily. 'And I needed his help.'

The Doctor shook his head.'There's something funny here.'

Both Iris and Gila were quiet.

'Look,' said the Doctor.'Can we agree on a truce, and sort this out? We all look as if we could do with a sit down. I know Sam and I could.'

For a moment Gila looked as if he was just going to turn and run into the night. Evidently, though, he remembered what he had been told about Iris's wealth, and stayed put.

'I'm entirely reasonable,' said Iris huffily. Then, instantly, her mood changed and she beamed. 'Let's all have a nice drinky and a chin-wag.' She eyed the Doctor.'Which regeneration?'

'Seventh,' he said.'This is my eighth self.'

'You're bolting through incarnations, aren't you? As you see, I'm still in the same delectable, comfy old bod.' It was true. She hadn't altered in the slightest since whenever their last do was. When she whipped off her hat, though, he saw that she'd given herself a home perm.

'I've had a hair-raising few years,' the Doctor said.'And my last body I kept for ages. I was the same one for what seemed like decades.' Why am I making excuses to her? he thought crossly. Then he stumped off to build a fire.

'I'll fetch the drinks!' Iris called after him.'And the nibbles.'

'Whatever,' he said.

'Why are you building a fire?' Sam asked.'It's roasting hot!'

'It's not for us,' he said, as he built up a pyramid of old sticks. 'It's protection. Keeping things away.'

'Oh.'

The Doctor couldn't get his fire to take. 'Stand back,' Gila told them, and stood himself in front of the kindling and started to whistle. A rush of blue flame issued from his mouth and, in seconds, a gorgeous, sapphire blaze illuminated their small camp beside the double-decker bus.'A nice cool flame,' Gila said modestly.

'That's quite a talent,' Sam said grudgingly. He shrugged.

There came a scream from the bus.

'That'll be Iris,' said the Doctor.'She's forever overreacting.'

He ran back to her snip, to find her hunched over the opened cocktail cabinet, clutching bottles of spirits to her chest and wailing.

'What's the matter?' asked the Doctor.'Have we run out of tonic?'

She ignored this and pointed to the bed settee. From amongst the clutter there arose a gleaming, lumpen mass.

'It must have sneaked aboard in the graveyard,' said the Doctor softly.

The ifrit turned its ghastly head to stare at them. Its amorphous body quivered with pleasure. 'The fellowship is gathering,' it whispered sarcastically.'You must be almost ready to start out on your quest.'

Iris bridled. 'If it's any of your business, this quest is already officially begun.'

'You can't succeed, you know,' said the ifrit.

The old woman's eyes narrowed.'What's it got to do with you?'

'You can't hold back death, Iris.' The spirit floated into the air and circled their heads.'And when you die, I'll be there. To gorge myself on your ample flesh.'

She was furious, and flung a bottle of gin straight at the apparition. It had already gone, and the Doctor had to duck to avoid getting hit. The bottle smashed through one of the windows.

There was a moment of silence.'What are you mixed up in, Iris?' asked the Doctor, not unkindly.

'You don't want to know.'

'Yes I do.You've involved Sam and me in this now.'

'You're free to go.'

'What's happened to you, Iris? You never used to go round holding people at gunpoint.'

She flung herself down on the squashy sofa and sighed. 'Oh, yes I did, Doctor. I did all sorts of dubious things you knew nothing about.' She sighed, staring out into the dark, at the blue campflre, where Gila and Sam were talking.'You were the virtuous one, remember?'

He looked at her. 'I think you're in trouble. Aren't you?'

'Don't even ask.' She heaved herself up to her feet. 'I hope I've got some more gin somewhere.'

***

It was late. Sam sat listening to the others talk far into the night. Even Gila had become companionable and less spiky, under the influence of drink and talk. From the bus there came music - one of Iris's old driving compilation tapes, no doubt. Soon Sam found herself drifting in and out of sleep.

'Will you both help me?' She heard Iris's rather slurred voice, apparently coming out of nowhere.

Gila sounded sulky. 'Perhaps if you'd explained things to me in the first place, I'd have helped you of my own accord.'

'Desperate measures,' said Iris.

Sam cursed at herself and lay still. She had fallen asleep and hadn't

heard Iris explain herself.

The Doctor was saying.'Getting mixed up with the Scarlet Empress... Iris, what are you doing? She's a tyrant! A despot! Have you heard her human-rights record on Hyspero alone? It's dreadful. She's brought the whole Scarlet dynasty into horrible disrepute just through -'

'I know, Doctor,' she said through gritted teeth. 'But sometimes we have to compromise our impeccable standards, don't we? And look at some of the people you've collaborated with.'

'Only with the best intentions at -'

'Davros, Napoleon, Al Capone, the Rani, Hitler. Doctor, you've no right to call me names.'

'Perhaps.'

'And besides. She's got me over a barrel.'

There was the clink and glug of more gin being poured. 'No ice,' said Iris sadly.

Gila said,'I'll help you.'

'You will?' Suddenly she seemed less depressed.

'Your mission is to bring the Four back together. You can't do that without me. It will be interesting. And if anyone can sort the Empress out, it's us.'

'Good,' said the Doctor. 'We're decided then.'

'You'll help me, Doctor?'

'Of course.'

'Then we start out tomorrow,' she said.'First light.'

Sam felt herself drifting off again.

She heard the Doctor saying, 'A toast - to a safe and uneventful journey.'

Gila snorted in derision.'Fat chance.'

***

Gila is back on the screen.

'I was one of the Four. We were great. We could do anything. Rescue anyone. Kidnap anyone. Start little wars and finish them. We were four and we each had separate strengths and skills and powers. Me, the Bearded Lady, the Cyborg Duchess and the Mock Turtle. Ten years ago they were queuing for our services. We were famous.'

'What happened?' asks Iris.

'We broke up the merry band.We scattered across Hyspero.We didn't expect to see each other again.'

Chapter Six
Another Day, Another Lovely Adventure

The Doctor was the first to wake. He found the small kitchen compartment at the back of Iris's bus, and started preparing breakfast on the old Baby Belling. Sam woke under heaped blankets on the sand to the smell of bacon grilling and the sound of the Doctor singing along, loudly and off-key, to Puccini.

Across the dwindling fire she could make out the shapes of Gila and Iris, both still last asleep. There was a scattering of cigarette butts around Iris and she still wore her sea-green hat, but it was pushed down over her face as she snored and muttered in her sleep. She was going on about Sontarans and perverting the course of human history. Not that she ever cared about such things, by all reports.

Sam went off to find the Doctor.

He was in his shirtsleeves in the cramped galley, slicing bread and stirring mugs of sugary, milky tea.

'So we're going off on some kind of adventure,' said Sam from the doorway, and made him jump.

'Ah,' he said.'I sort of pledged our support last night. Poached or fried?'

'I can't bear poached, like eating eyeballs. Do you know what it's all about, then?'

She watched him heat oil until it shimmered, and then crack eggs on the pan. 'Mm. Kind of. Iris has been sent to reunite the members of a... team, I suppose you'd call it, of mutant vigilantes. Or vigilante mutants. Gila was one of them, ten or so years ago. They all went their separate ways and stopped hiring themselves out for... fighting people, sorting out messes and muddles and so on, whatever that sort of person gets up to. Ouch!' He'd burnt his finger on the grill pan.

'Stick it under the tap. Who wants them back together?'

He held his hand under the cold tap, wincing. 'Well, it's the Scarlet Empress, the unscrupulous ruler of this province. And what plans she has I don't know. All I know is that Iris thinks she'll be in terrible trouble if

she doesn't get these people together.'

'Why don't we just go to this Empress and ask?'

'I'd feel happier facing her with Gila's friends in tow. They were quite famous hereabouts, you know. And besides, there's something going on here I want to know about.'

He presented her with a plate of toast and fried eggs.'All right?'

'So long as I know what we're getting into.'

'Just a jaunt,' he smiled. 'We're a team, aren't we? And this way, we get to see something of the world. Let's wake the others.'

***

Iris had a mammoth hangover. She waved away the breakfast that the Doctor brought her. 'I can't eat that greasy nonsense!' she gasped. 'My figure!' She pushed past him, into the bus, and rummaged around in a cupboard for fresh cigarettes. 'Another day, another lovely adventure,' she grumbled. 'Sam, dear, would you fetch some paracetamol from the kitchen? They're in the fridge.'

Gila was wolfing two breakfasts at the fold-down table in the gangway. 'So where do we start?'

'Map, Sam!'called the Doctor.

She felt around inside her bag and flung it at him. Proudly he unfolded his rough map of Hyspero across the breakfast table. Iris cast a beleaguered eye over it.

'That's rubbish,' she said.

The Doctor looked stung. 'It's the best map of Hyspero I've seen.'

'Lights,' Iris called to her TARDIS, and instantly the lights dimmed and shutters came down over all the bus windows. A projection screen slid over the window closest to them, and a multicoloured transparency of an ancient Hysperon map shivered into being.

'That's very impressive,' said the Doctor.

GUa stared closely at the map's intricate detailing. 'It's got little pictures of the people and creatures and the places and buildings of interest...'

The Doctor picked up his own map, and slid it away into his pocket. He had drawn it himself, many years ago, on his first visit here. Of course it couldn't compete with Iris's charts.

"The first thing we have to do,' said Iris.'is get through the mountains.' She looked at Gila. "The other three all travelled south, beyond the mountains.'

'That'll take us to the Forest of Kestheven,' said Gila.'Out of the desert and the mountains, into the woods. So we'll look for Angela first. The last I heard of her, she was still living in the wilds. She went back to nature.'

'Over the mountains we go, then,' said Iris.'Lights!' The gaudy, rather decadent lamps flickered back on, and the shutters slid up again. 'Doctor, have you got some coffee brewing? I can't smell any.'

'I haven't yet,' he said stiffly, collecting up dishes.

'Doctor,' said Sam, 'let her get her own coffee! Why are you running round after everyone?'

'I don't know!' He tried to assert himself. 'I suggest we go via the mountains, urn, this morning.'

'That's what we're doing,' said Iris. 'It's already decided.' She got up and bustled past him to the kitchen. 'I'll put my own coffee on. Sam, darling, do you drive?'

'Not double-decker buses, she doesn't,' said the Doctor.

'Draw up a rota for driving, would you, Sam? No longer than three hours at the wheel each.'

Sam asked,'If this is a TARDIS, why don't you just take us straight to this forest place?'

Iris was shaking coffee grounds out into the sink, all over the washing up. 'What, and land right in the middle of nowhere? Go blundering about with no idea?' Iris cackled.'You've been spending too much time with him

over there, lovey.'

Sam laughed, and the Doctor shot her a look.

Within the hour the dishes were done, Iris had smoked her fifth cigarette of the morning, and they were on their way. Iris took the wheel, and wrestled mightily to get the bus on to the road that ran rutted and winding through the plains.

***

That afternoon Sam sat up front with Iris, who drove hunched over the wheel, glaring at the horizon. Sam pulled a deck-chair up beside the cab and did the important things, as Iris put it: lighting her cigarettes, changing the tapes.

'Hold the wheel again, Sam, there's a dear.' Iris had an old-fashioned camcorder in her handbag that she would pull out every now and then, to grab a few shots out of the window when the scenery got interesting.

After an hour or so the younger woman realised that she was actually enjoying herself. Mostly they sat in companionable silence, or singing along together, at first hesitantly, and then more raucously, to the Beatles, the Carpenters and the Beach Boys. Sam surprised herself byknowing the words to all of those songs. It was even more surprising, really, to find that Iris knew all these songs too.'You just pick them up, don't you? By osmosis, I think.' Actually, Sam thought, she knew all these lyrics from her parents' records. At least Iris wasn't playing Pink Floyd.

The flies were terrible, crawling into the bus and squirming about on whatever bare patches of flesh they could find. Sam was still in yesterday's grungy T-shirt and shorts. Luckily she'd remembered the extra bra and knickers in her haversack (a fake leopard-skin number Iris heartily approved of). In her travels with the Doctor she had learned that it paid to set out prepared for a few days' roughing it. Her mother had instilled into her a fear of being without clean underwear. Iris agreed with this when Sam told her. 'I think it's psychological,' she pontificated.'I have only the very best underwear. I shop constantly for lingerie.'

Sam was steeling herself to ask Iris if she could hunt around in her glorious wardrobe upstairs. But she was too wiped out just now. Maybe later. The Doctor was very proud of the wardrobe room aboard his

TARDIS, with its outfits from all over the galaxy, but Sam hadn't been very impressed. Iris laughed at this. 'And this new feller he's gone and turned into looks like such a... dandy!'

'A dandy?' Sam smiled.

'He was letting himself go, a little while ago. Just throwing any old thing on. Midlife crisis, I thought. Good to see he's back on the rails.' Iris remembered something. 'Did he ever tell you about me and him bumping into Wilde in Paris? After Wilde's imprisonment?'

Sam shook her head.'He doesn't tell me much about the past.'

'We met one of your era's most marvellous wits -' My era? thought Sam - 'and they spent the whole afternoon drinking absinthe and talking about where they had their shirts made.' Iris shook her head. 'I listened in amazement. Of course, they managed to turn the whole concept of having a beautiful shirt made for you into a metaphor for anything you could think of. Life, art, love, everything. It was quite a conversation. I came away reeling.'

'So the Doctor met Oscar Wilde?'

'Darling, the Doctor's met everyone. Even if he doesn't remember it so well now.' Iris turned to look down the gangway.'Where is he, anyway?' Gila shouted,'Upstairs reading. He wanted some time alone.'

'Earwigging,' Sam warned him. Gila hissed at her. He was playing some kind of computer game. A slash-and-destroy warrior thing that made him shout out at intervals.

Sam asked,'Was it true, what you said, about your reason for not just materialising at our destination?'

Iris chuckled.'You're not daft, are you?'

'Just asking...'

"You think I'm doing my best to prolong this and keep the Doctor with me, don't you?'

'Do I?'

Iris owned up. 'Partly that. But I meant it, too. This forest we're travelling into isn't the friendliest of environments. Even this ship is erratic. I wouldn't want to land somewhere awful. I prefer to sneak up on my quarry.'

"That's not the Doctor's style,' said Sam.

'He'll have to lump it. He's just a passenger.'

'You're very fond of him, aren't you?'

'Who, me? Fond of the Doctor?' Iris grinned broadly. 'Do you realise how rarely I see him? Almost every time I do, he's become someone else. That's a lot of wasted time, Sam. Hundreds of years.' She gave her a sidelong glance.'Take the wheel a second, will you? I want to take my cardy off.'

Underneath she was wearing a sheer silver blouse with incredibly wide collars. She flattened these and fluffed up her hair before taking the wheel back. "Thank you, my dear. Now, pop upstairs and ask the Doctor what he'd like to do about dinner tonight.!'

***

'Is it my turn at the wheel?' the Doctor asked. He was sitting on the long front seat at the very top of the bus. That had always been Sam's favourite place in buses. Especially coming back from school, or from town on Saturday afternoon. The Doctor had his feet up on the rail in front and was watching the endless desert unscroll around them.

'I just came up to say hello, really. Are you reading thatAja'ib thing again?'

'Oh, just flicking, really. My mind's all over the place. It keeps going on about these awful automata made of bronze and steel, and how they run around possessed by spirits, killing everyone they come across. Now they've found some way of making themselves invisible, on a planet where the natives are naturally invisible, and can only tell where each other is by wearing immense purple fur coats.' He chuckled and shut the book. 'It's ludicrous.'

'Iris was telling me about when you met Oscar Wilde.'

'was she? She's got a memory like a... like an elephant. That's right, isn't it?'

Sam nodded. 'What do you want to do for dinner, she wants to know.'

'Anything, I suppose. Is Gila behaving himself?'

'He's OK.'

'Did she tell you who we're looking for next? "The Doctor unrolled his sleeves.'Angela the Bearded Lady. She's got the strength of ten men and she flies the trapeze, apparently. I feel like I've joined the circus.' He looked out of the window. There was a low-roofed wooden building coming towards them. It stood in the middle of nowhere. 'An oasis!' he said, and pinged the bell. 'Let's see if she'll let us out for a bit.'

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'Why build a cafe like this in the middle of the desert?' asked Sam. She expected somewhere rougher, more down at heel. Here they had gingham tablecloths, tomato-shaped bottles for tomato sauce, and a wine cooler.

'They were used to lots of quests coming through this way from Hyspero,' said Iris. 'At one time that highroad was chock-a-block with parties seeking their fortunes. They were more adventurous times.' She chose a table for four by the plate-glass windows, so she could watch over her bus. It looked dusty and forlorn without them, Sam thought. Iris was going to have to do something about that broken window.

'It's busier than you'd expect,' said the Doctor, sliding into his seat.

Sam looked round, and it was true: quite a few tables were occupied. There was even a couple playing pool. Behind the counter lurched the unprepossessing proprietor, a vast woman with a hostile stare, and folds of leathery skin like a bulldog. A Steigertrude,' the surprised Doctor informed her with a nudge;'look at her little tusks'. Then, as Gila wearily read out the menu, he started to tell her about what the Steigertrudes had once done with android replicates.

'I think we have to go up and order,' said Gila, seeming wary of the woman's stare. Iris took herself off to order.

Gila tried to make polite conversation. 'I still don't know where you two come from.'

'Here and there,' said the Doctor, vaguely.

'South London,' said Sam. She saw that their arrival had gathered a certain amount of attention. But no one bothered them, their food arrived which, to their relief, didn't consist of the various locusts-boiled-in-honey and offal-related dishes that the menu promised. Iris had managed to coax the Steigertrude owner into serving them marvellous warmed salmon salads, with black olives and soft white bread.

'But where do they get these things out here?' asked Sam.

'Matter transmitter,' said the Doctor, tweezing an olive stone from between his teeth.

As if on cue, the space of air between them, the counter and the door turned blue and filled with heat haze. Four tall figures were materialising. Everyone stared at the jumbled opalescence in the gangway and held their breath.

The other clientele seemed to melt into the background. The Steigertrude woman slipped back into her kitchen. They must be used to trouble here, Sam thought. Gila had produced a vicious-looking knife from somewhere, and was on his feet before the figures had formed themselves. Iris was fumbling in her handbag, no doubt for the blaster. Sam had seen her put it in there earlier.

'Um, hello,' said the Doctor, sliding straight into his usual diplomacy.

Four soldiers in ceremonial robes stood before them. Each was tattooed from head to foot in shades of blue and green. Patchwork, piecemeal, bricolaged designs covered even their faces and bald heads. Each was distinct, and comprehensively illustrated with the flora and fauna of the planet Hyspero. As they took in their new surroundings they bowed deeply, as one, at the four travellers.

How immaculate they look, next to the four of us, thought Iris. She reminded herself sadly how hard it is to look chic on a quest.

For all their courtly bowing, each of the scarlet-liveried soldiers clutched a gleaming scimitar.

'Who are they?' hissed Sam.

'The personal guards of the Empress,' the Doctor said. 'I think we've been rumbled.'

Chapter Seven
Nobody Thinks Nothing

Iris is being filmed by Sam again. Her silver blouse glints in the sunlight. She shields her eyes.

'I love a good scrap;

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They were taken outside to stand against the bus and the day seemed hotter than ever. A stiff wind had picked up, like the blast on opening an oven door, whirling loose bits of scrub grass and hard patters of sand into their faces. They could feel the eyes of everyone in the roadside cafe on them, as well as the pink albino eyes of the guards of the Scarlet Empress. They were herded and prodded and told brusquely to be quiet. They had been quickly overpowered. Iris's blaster proved less than useless - broken inside her bag and leaking fuel into the lining. Gila had been forced to surrender his knife. Iris tried to say that she demanded the meaning of this, but she was silenced with one curt glance from the leader of the tattooed men.

Here they were forced to stand in the baking heat. The minutes ticked and trickled by. The Doctor looked at Sam.'We've left the cafe without paying our bill,' he said. "That's a bargain.'

He was promptly hit in the mouth and, as he slipped to the ground, Sam flung herself at the offending guard. She flattened him with surprise and Iris and Gila took their cues, Iris careering spectacularly into her own specially adapted Venusian aikido.

The Doctor struggled to his feet amid the pandemonium, in time to see the apparent leader of this mission raise his scimitar into a whirling, blinding arc of gold. He prepared to bring it slashing into the exposed back of Gila, who was busy laying into another of the guards. With a great shout, the Doctor leapt into the fray, coat tails flying.

They were embroiled in what seemed to Iris - even as she fought like a rampant tigress - the most disgracefully inelegant scrap.

And then the hot air cracked with the deadly sound of round after round of machine-gun fire.Which brought the rumpus to a sudden end.

'Nobody move,' came a hoarse, unfamiliar voice. They stilled themselves in the clouds of rank dust they had managed to kick up. Gila took advantage of the hiatus to disarm his opponent, cracking the tattooed man's wrist in the process. There was a wounded yelp.

One more burst of gunfire.'Shut it!'

The bulky, grey-skinned waitress was wedged in the doorway of her establishment, squinting in the harsh light of day, with the ancient, smoking weapon slung expertly at her vast hip. She bellowed at the scarlet-robed guards, 'We've never put up with your sort here. The Empress holds no sway with the likes of us.'

Three of the guards promptly melted away like illusions.

'They soon gave in,' said Sam.

"They're sworn to protect their beautiful painted hides,' said Iris, picking herself up. "The Empress goes to immense expense to have them walking round like the living embodiment of exquisite, aestheticised pain, and she doesn't want them damaged.'

Gila kicked his own remaining, overpowered guard. 'What about this one?'

The Doctor said,'His little T-mat thing isn't working.'

The panic-stricken guard was using his unbroken wrist to click a switch in his belt buckle. His eyes were wild and pink.

The Doctor went striding towards the gun-toting Steigertrude, holding out both hands affably. 'Madam, you are a saviour...'

The woman growled low in her quivering, dewlapped throat. 'Just count yourself lucky,' she sneered.

'We do, we do,' he smiled.

'I think you should go now,' she grunted, and slipped the safety catch back on. "That'll be seventy dirnars. Service not included.'

The Doctor laughed.'And what service!' He turned to Iris.'Well, pay the

woman!'

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Within minutes they were back on the road, with Sam at the wheel - refusing to let the Doctor argue her out of it - and their prisoner was trussed up on the fold-out sofa.

'Why did you come after me?' Iris shouted, over the engine noise. 'What is that Empress of yours after now? Doesn't she trust me? Doesn't she think I'll go through with this? What kind of treachery has she dreamed up in that withered, pestilential old head of hers?'

Gila nudged her 'Let him get a word in edgeways.'

'Shut up,' said Iris, now well into her interrogative stride.'What's going on?'

The guard stared balefully. He licked his lips - patterned, the Doctor suddenly realised, with the neatly curling, emerald fronds of some kind of indigenous orchid - and said, 'Her majesty was suspicious, yes. She wanted to keep an eye on your progress.'

'She's very impatient,' said the Doctor.

'She is seething,' the guard said. He looked at Gila. 'Is this one of the mutant freaks?'

Gila hissed.

Iris nodded.

'Is he the one?'

She shook her head quickly.

'Is he the one, what?' Gila demanded.

Iris said,'So we have to go on and seek out the rest. Unhampered and unimpeded by you scabby lot.'

'Who's that one?' The guard nodded feebly at the Doctor.

'A friend,' said Iris.'He's just helping out.'

'The Empress swore you to secrecy.'

'Oh, shut up,' said Iris impatiently. 'Look. When I've got news, I'll let you know. She knows that. And she knows how experienced I am in this kind of business. I'll get the goods. When there's something to report, shell be hearing from me. And not before. Now I think it's time you left us, don't you?'

The guard just glared at her hatefully.

***

They left him by the roadside in what could only be described as the middle of nowhere. The Doctor went to the galley at the back of the bus to put some coffee on to brew. He watched through the back window as the vivid blue and red of the soldier vanished into the whiteness of the bleak landscape and the heat haze, receding quickly as Sam drove them recklessly down the open road.

Iris leaned over the Doctor's shoulder.'Do you know what her private guard call her?'

He spooned fresh coffee into the pot.'Hmm?'

"The Queen of Jam. The Glass Sultan. Because she sits inside a great glass cylinder, swimming forever in translucent, life-preserving unguents and never comes out. She's lost most of her faculties, protecting and preserving herself from the world.'

'I've never met her,' said the Doctor. 'I've never had the honour.'

Iris said simply,'She's a monster.'

The Doctor asked, 'What is it we're looking for? What did you mean when you said Gila isn't the one?'

'Oh, Doctor,' she smiled. 'Don't worry your pretty little head.'

He turned on her angrily.'I'm being extraordinarily patient with you, Iris.'

She patted his arm. 'I know you are, my dear. And I appreciate it. And I

know how you hate being even one step behind anyone else. But trust me, hmm? I'm slightly embarrassed by all of this. By being found colluding with a tyrant.Yet it's all very necessary. It'll all come out right in the end.'

He watched the road unspool behind them.Tll trust you, Iris,' he said. 'Only because I suspect you've got yourself into something very deep. And I rather think I'll have to be there, eventually, to dig you out again.'

She smiled and, by mutual, unspoken consent, they decided to leave it at that. As the coffee started to bubble and hiss the bus's speakers crackled into life and Abba came on.

'Someone come and talk to me!' Sam yelled down the aisle. She turned in surprise as Gila slipped into the chair beside her, and started to tell her about the good old days, when his mutant vigilante squad rode the highways, sailed the seas, and had adventures that she could only ever dream about.

The Doctor strolled down the aisle and sat thoughtfully on a seat at the front. As Gila's story came to an end, the Doctor said, quite out of the blue, though no one had asked him,'Oh, I'm sure he's fine out there in the desert. I don't suppose his Empress would let a fine precious pelt like his go to waste.'

Sam gave him an odd look, wondering who he was justifying himself to. Sometimes he seemed to have to do this.

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Sam is having a go on the camcorder. She corners Gila in the kitchen, where he is searching through the tiny fridge.

Sam tells him,'Your eyes are flicking about all over the place.'

'I'm starving. Looking for something to eat.'

'You look all intent. Tell me what you're thinking.'

'I'm not thinking about anything.'

'Nobody doesn't think about anything.'

'What?'

'I mean, nobody thinks nothing.'

'Well,'he sighs, closing the fridge,'I do.'

'Is that usual, though? I wish I could empty my mind of all thoughts. Have you asked anyone if they're like you?'

'No.'

'Don't you wonder?'

'No, I don't. Have you asked anyone if they can clear their minds?'

'No. But I'm asking you now.'

'Well, I can. Lucky me.'

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That night, once they had assembled blankets and the rough makings of a camp in a hollow of sand by the roadside, Iris started to regale them with more of what she knew about the Glass Sultan. Another cool blue fire caught them in its lambent spell, and they fell to listening to the old woman's warm, quite hypnotic tones.

'Do you know how she gets her seers?'

'I've heard the stories,' said Gila. 'Vague rumours. She has a room full of them, doesn't she? She keeps them locked up, all of them prophesying the future?'

'The Scarlet Empress has a mania for knowing the future,' said Iris. 'Which is why she keeps coming after me, I think. She is horrendousty paranoid that one day someone will come and depose her and put an end to her cruel exploits and her languorous, malign rule. So she seeks out these people who have the sight, who have a particular, bright blue cast to their eyes...' Here Iris stared across the fire into the Doctor's eyes. 'And she imprisons them. She pops them in a cauldron of oil, of some sweet, prepared, corrosive oil, and here they stay for forty days, drugged out of their skulls. All their flesh dissolves and drops away, their organs melt into the oil and their poor, astonished heads are left,

perched atop a calcified skeleton. When the whole series of rituals enacted around them is over, these heads are snapped off at the first vertebra. The head is placed in a room with the other seer heads she has cultivated over the years, a circular room. And there it is set to work, to flatter and cosset her with consoling tales of the future. And also to bring dire warnings.'

Sam gulped. 'That's disgusting.' She stirred at the remains of her dinner. The cooling coils and spirals of onion in a vegetable-based sauce.

'The families of these seers are honoured. But they don't know what goes on. All they hear is that their loved ones are living in the lap of luxury, serving the Empress with their rare gifts.'

They sat for a while, thinking about this.

'No one can see the future,' said Gila at last. 'It's with barbaric practices like that that the Empress keeps this world, and her city, enslaved - by pretending that we're all in some dark age, full of mysticism and magic. Here, they all believe you can do anything with sorcery, with spices and potions and evil intent. It is a determinedly backward world.'

The Doctor said softly, 'Hyspero, the city and the world, are a law unto themselves. You shouldn't be too dismissive of the dark powers that certain people here have harnessed, Gila.'

'Come off it, Doctor,' said Sam.'You're not going to say you believe in magic and sorcery, are you? You of all people.'

'The proof is generally in the pudding, Sam,' he said. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means that once upon a time I thought rationality was everything. That you could understand everything if you pushed at it with enough clear-headed logic and refused to give in to superstition. I thought it was all claptrap. But these days...' He sighed.'I would describe myself as an ethnomethodologist. It's still science. But it's about setting yourself within the parameters of the society you are visiting. Thinking from their point of view. Looking at their consolatory myths and ideas from within. I'm not so quick to dismiss the arcane, the apparently magical. Look at vampires, Sam. You must have grown up with an idea of vampires existing only in horror stories, in vague, musty legends. But you met them; they're real. They exist within their own terms. They are both as

fabulous and ordinary as you are.'

Sam didn't know whether to feel flattered or not.

'Some kind of sorceries appear to work here on Hyspero,' the Doctor continued, lying back. 'And they conform to a system of belief and science about which I know very little. Even to me they seem magical. When we're tourists like we are, we just have to entertain and respect the bizarre logic of each new experience as we get to it.'

'It's a hell of a world,' said Iris. 'IVe had a few peculiar run-ins here.'

'So you think the Scarlet Empress really can tell the future?' Sam asked the Doctor. 'By asking her roomful of mummified heads?'

'Who's to say?' he said airily, infuriatingly.

'If she hears anything from their heads it must be her own delusions,' said Gila.'It's all inher head. She makes it up.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'But isn't it in the nature of tyrants to impose their wills, their imaginations, their versions of the world on everyone else? We all do that to lesser or greater degrees.'

Sam started to feel uncomfortable. 'You make me feel like there's no real world at all. Just a big mass of shared delusions.' He gave her a twinkling smile. 'But that's impossible!' she protested. 'Real things happen, you can get hurt, Gila broke that tattooed man's wrist. A couple of days ago you sprained your ankle!'

'Of course we feel things,' said the Doctor. "The world impinges upon us. But our imaginations have to collude with that world to make it happen. It's all rather sticky.' Then he said something that surprised them. 'I feel like I've got my own chamber of disembodied heads, passing out counsel, warnings and reminiscences. I've an interior set of seers: the seven previous me's, all stuck on spikes, all gossiping and telling me what to do. Now, are you going to say that's any different from the delusions of the Scarlet Empress? I can't afford not to listen to the intermittent, whispered comments of my other selves. I don't suppose the Queen of Jam can, either.'

Sam thought about this. She was sleepy. Somehow she knew she would end up dreaming tonight about severed heads and how they could be

made to speak. The Doctor had unsettled her, talking like this about himself. Typical. He can't tell you anything nice about himself. Sometimes she dreaded this usually hidden, darker side to his nature.

'Have you ever met your other selves, Doctor?' asked Iris.

He spluttered, and lied, as if she had asked him something rather shameful.'Of course not... That, um, contravenes the First Law of...' The old woman was grinning at him.'Well,' he said.'Once or twice. Only by sheer accident, and then a number of hideous catastrophes that necessitated our being brought into the same timestream as each other.'

Iris said. 'It happened to me. Seven of me were taken to the Death Zone on Gallifrey. Someone had reactivated the Games they used to play there. Each of my selves, present, past and future, was given a relevant companion and playmate, and we were forced to battle our separate, and then collective ways, past Ice Warriors, Ogrons, Sea Devils, Zarbi, Mechanoids and Quarks, to get to the Dark Tower. Good job we only got rubbishy monsters to battle, eh?' The Doctor was staring at her. 'It was that devil Morbius behind it all. The rogue was after Rassilon's gift of immortality.' Iris chuckled at the Doctor's face. 'You're not the only one who gets to have terribly glamorous adventures, you know.'

After this, they started to go off to their sleeping bags. As Sam went off to use the bizarre, effective, but somehow unsatisfying sonic shower on the top deck of the bus, the Doctor muttered something to her, along the lines of Iris being such a show-off and name-dropper. She simply smiled at him but, as she washed and pulled on some exquisite yellow silk pyjamas Iris had produced for her, she felt a jab of sorrow for the Doctor. He was having his thunder stolen somewhat. Tomorrow he was driving them, however, and maybe that would make him feel more in control.

Sam went back downstairs, and into the night, to sleep under the stars, and dream about bodyless seers, foretelling disaster.

Chapter Eight
Any Vigilante's Life

As the days go on and establish their easy patterns, the mountains have come into view, savage and green, still days away from us. But we all know that soon we will be climbing. Only I know what to expect when we leave the desert and reach the ranges. Possibly Iris does too, since she claims to have explored these lands. She shows few signs of trepidation. I think the old woman is full of false bravado. If anyone had gone through the rigours she says she has endured, they would be dead.

The Doctor and Sam have become careless and relaxed of late. We have had curious, concentrated days of travelling the plains. The Doctor points out birds and creatures to us, impressing us with his erudition. Yet you can see his mind is on other things. It seems that nothing escapes his attention. Sometimes I feel I ought to warn them of what is to come, in the mountains and beyond, but I cannot. Something stops me. The Doctor is so infuriatingly confident.

So we have these easy days, of replacing each other in the driving seat of the bus, this tireless vehicle that never seems to need fuel. Ms claims that it is powered by a vital green and pink, everlasting crystal, somewhere underneath the dashboard. It is certainly a remarkable vehicle.

We drive, we eat, we drink and we talk. No end of talking on this trip. Sam tells us about London, a place so full of lives and preoccupations that it dwarfs even Hyspero. I can't imagine such a place, but the Doctor concurs: he has visited Sam's birthplace on numerous occasions. These recent days the Doctor himself has opened up and found himself talking and explaining about himself. Even to me, at whom he looked so distrustfully at first. The atmosphere about Iris's strange vehicle has worked on us like a charm, cohering us, making us a team. The turning point, I think, came with the capturing and expelling of the tattooed guard of the Scarlet Empress. That proof of her suspicion and enmity bonded us against the Empress, even as we act supposedly on her instructions.

Whenever I think of the Scarlet Empress, I remember the Throne Room, and when we were brought before her, ten years ago. The last time the Four were united. I never wanted to go back there. I think we may have to.

This company is not like the old days. It is not like being in a team like the Four. When we were together then, we didn't talk about ourselves. How much did we really know about each other? Friendship, companionship never came into it.

Then, our identities were secret to the world. We wore our mutant powers as badges, as masks - masks that carry out that paradoxical double function: to conceal our true selves and yet to render us conspicuous. Our essences, it seemed, were always elsewhere, which made the Four strangers to each other, as we were to the rest of the world.

We existed merely to carry out our function, which was to do whatever was demanded by our paymasters of the time. We laid our miraculous services before the highest bidder. And in any fracas, mission, quest or imbroglio, we were never bested.

The other day, when I told Sam about some of our old escapades, she seemed perturbed. 'But did you end up doing things you disagreed with?'

I said that naturally, we did. I said we had to suppress that part of ourselves that entertained moral qualms. If you offer yourself up for sale, then you can't afford to discriminate. At this Sam looked shocked.'So you just did what the person with the most cash asked you?'

I nodded. And, in our small craft, the Coriolanus , our team flew all over the world of Hyspero, flaunting our wares. And regularly, I said, anticipating the girl's next question, we found ourselves fighting for one side of a conflict, and then, the following week, the other.We turned and turned again. Sabotage was our particular forte. In one small war, we ruined one party's weapons, and were then employed to put a stop to the other's. We set about battling our own shadows.

'That's madness,' said Sam.

'It was our life for years,' I told her. 'It's any vigilante's life. You don't stop to take breath or to grow soft on existential angst. And we became very rich.'

The way she looked at me I could tell she thought she had never met anyone more corrupt. The conversation ended there. I was driving at the time, and she went very quiet. She was disgusted with me and, truth be

told, if she knew some of the things we were paid to accomplish, I don't suppose she would talk to me again. Now she thinks of me as vicious and amoral and yet... if I was those things, I would never have been strong enough to disband the Four when I did, citing exactly the kind of ethical problems Sam had tried to articulate. It wasn't that I had been without moral sense - I had merely repressed it, brutally, for many years. So at the height of our wealth and the peak of our performance, I disbanded our team and told the others that we must spread far and wide. And the four of us should never meet again.

Until now, that is. This particular mission. Something is going on. Iris is in the thick of it. And I want in.

That night, when I appeared to disgust Sam with talk of my past, I pulled the bus to a halt and went off for a walk deep into the surrounding countryside. We were in a zone in which plant life was trying to reestablish itself.A primitive, stunted region. These were the foothills before the mountains; you could feel the land beginning to rise. Streams and lakes must be here, somewhere. I followed their scent, needing water. This hide of mine was cracked with heat and I required those few hours apart to submerge myself in dark, dank water.

I returned, replenished, glistening, to find the others sitting by the roadside, waiting for me.

'We thought you'd abandoned us,' said the Doctor, raising an eyebrow.

'He wouldn't, though,' Sam said, unexpectedly.

I found myself being sarcastic, as I often do. 'You think I'm still after Iris's riches.'

'No,' Sam told me.'I think you're loyal to your old friends, if not to us. I think you're less greedy and ruthless than you like to appear.'

She was just trying to be nice to me. To get me back into their company. They know they need my help. We had the most pleasant evening of the week, then. Sam picked vegetables while I caught rabbits in the dusty grass nearby and we roasted them on a spit.

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I dreamed that night of my home and my parents. It was the first time in

many years I had ever thought back. The late-night conversation had been of origins. Sam had described a father and a mother who didn't understand who she really was. Iris talked vaguely of growing up in a matriarchy, among women much older than herself, her Aunts, she called them. They lived in a great house among the mountains of her world. Her mother had vanished when Iris was quite small, into the dawn with a man who was a great deal older, an offworlder. Iris spoke of her Aunts' deaths, one after another, and how she set forth alone for the great city, celebrated across her world. She was going to demand to learn their way of life, to become part of their world. They had great learning - a marvellous civilisation. It was her most perilous journey, she said - her first. And, at the end of it, she discovered a race of charlatans, quivering old men who knew all the secrets of the cosmos, it seemed, but preferred to spend their time in eternal, futile politicking, and the thankless task of scrutinising, cataloguing, all of known creation. And, even though their president was a woman, their ranks closed in front of a woman like Iris. And here Iris's tale stopped, for now, at least.

The Doctor looked sour, and I realised that the two of them must share a homework!. He was silent on the subject of his upbringing. Except for this: he asked Iris,'And They have never bothered you since?'

She shrugged disarmingty. 'I'm surprised you've never asked before, Doctor. But, no. I doubt that They even know I exist. I found my TARDIS, wounded, abandoned, in the wilderness. They didn't even miss it.'

The Doctor looked gloomy.'You should be grateful they never let you in.You've enjoyed amazing freedom.'

She pulled a face.'I suppose so.'

'You've never been put on trial, exiled, summoned to carry out ridiculous tasks, dragged back to your ancestral home to atone for sins that weren't even yours...' He let his words dry up. Then, 'I think I rather envy you, his. You've had, in many ways, the life I wanted for myself.'

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So that night, I dreamed of the swamps - our small town huddled between the monstrous boles of trees, the tops of which none of us ever saw. we barely saw daylight.We grew up pallid and phlegmatic. My family and the families we knew never moved from their source. And everything we had smelled of the rank waters of the swamp. It seeped

into everything. We coughed, our chests rattled, we sank back in torpor and the phlegmy stupefaction of our place in the world.

A dangerous land: infants were routinely carried off in the dark by the slinking, jaw-clashing quadrupeds whose scales my own flesh had grown to imitate. It was a miracle any of us lived to maturity. And when we did there were festivities. Such poor, doleful festivities. The best we could manage saw us feasting on a lumpen broth of turnips and frogs, drinking whisky of fermented bark, smoking tobacco rolled from the leaves that dwindled to the forest floor and we dried over our fires. This tobacco we stunned ourselves with, in order to blot out our fetid, unchanging circumstances.

In my dream I was leaving home again. I was following the stranger who had come to town to tell us that Hyspero was a world with a thousand and one different circumstances, environments, places and ways to live. Our dark squalor wasn't all. Everyone I knew looked sceptical at this. He was charismatic, this stranger, so they listened. Gathered to hear him describe the great capital city of Hyspero, which teemed with wealth and intrigue. They listened to the hooded, robed stranger, as if he was telling them fairy tales. And yet I, just grown to maturity, a figure of curiosity and suspicion because of the mutant growth of my skin and my peculiar, burgeoning powers, was drawn in by his tale of the rest of the world.

I went with him and found, when we left the swamplands behind, that every word he had told us was true. But he was a slaver. And what difficulties I had after that, sold into bondage, eluding and escaping him. But at least I was on my way.

I slept this night at the edge of the desert, sweltering under the canopy of words the four of us had talked up that night, that hung over us, webbing us in complicity. We were all runaways, it seemed to me -well matched, really. I could smell the rotting hulks of the trees again, the stagnant sickness of the waters. I was home again, waiting for the lure of the evil stranger who would, in his own way, free me.

It was a relief to wake up, to find myself me now, and on this current quest.

The others still slept. The fire was almost out. Lilac embers crackled in the makeshift grate.

I heard a shrill creaking noise: the working of an ancient, unoiled joint. It

seemed to be coming through the air and coming closer. I grasped the sword Iris had lent me from her secret armoury aboard the bus and stood, wondering if I should alert the others.

Then, out of the dark, flew a silver bird.

Quite gently it came, winging softly and disturbing the air like the slightest of breaths. It came out of the dark and hovered directly above the fire. I squinted, fell back, rubbed my eyes. The bird flapped its wings before me and it seemed to consider me.

It squeaked like an old machine and I saw that it was a created thing, of thin, beaten metal, all knocked together with pins and rivets. Its wings were like splayed fingers and its head like two thumbs entwined. I saw that it wasn't a bird at all, but two disembodied hands, joined together like those of someone making a shadow-play of a bird.

It creaked and hovered and beat its fake wings at me.

They were the hands of a cyborg, the nails painted plainly black, disguising sensors and intricate circuitry. They were, I realised, the hands of the cyborg we were pledged to seek out. The Duchess's hands. Somehow the cyborg Duchess was aware of our coming and had sent out these hands, this cool, metal envoy, to... what? Check up on us? Warn us of something?

I was about to ask aloud, when the hands turned in mid-air, flapped three times for momentum, and shot off into the night.

I stood staring silently after them, unsure even which direction they had taken.

In the morning I didn't tell the others what I had seen.

I don't know why.

Chapter Nine
All About Equilibrium

Sam half expected the Doctor to crow with triumph when it turned out that Iris's map wasn't as marvellous as she'd pretended. He was, though, remarkably restrained as they pulled down the blinds once more to consult the archaic charts. Gila looked frankly sceptical as she worried at the tangled, multicoloured and dotted lines that covered and confused the mountain ranges.

They were in the sandy foothills still, looking for the best route across. What Iris had enthusiastically described as the easiest, widest and most secure road for the bus to take had completely vanished.

"There's meant to be a road here,' she cursed, as they crested yet another steep hill, the broad vista of green crags stretching impressively before them. Iris's gaze was fixed on the ground, however, glaring at the place where she had predicted a forking in the road. They were supposed to bear left. But the road they were on had chosen to peter out. They had hit an utterly desolate land.

So Iris stared deeply into the luminous map and still nothing came clear.

'It's obvious,' said Gila at last.'The desert has simply brushed the road away. The sands have risen up to obscure all previous tracks and traces.' To him - who prided himself on his lack of superstition - it even seemed to be a sign that no adventure could be the same twice. A new route must be uncovered.

'It certainly looks that way,' said the Doctor.'Tabula rasa .'

'Isn't that a drink?' Sam laughed.

'You're thinking of Tia Maria.'

Iris cursed again. 'Why is it you can never trust anything to stay the same?' She looked accusingly at the Doctor, as if it was all his fault.'I had it all sorted out. The neatest route. Everything!'

The Doctor shrugged.'We'll just have to rely on our wits.'

'Oh, whoopee,' said Sam.

'He's right,' said Gila.'Travelling blind into the mountains.'

'That's exactly what I didn't want to do,' said Iris. 'I hate flying straight into the unknown. Anything can happen. You can wind up anywhere and any old how.'

This made the Doctor cheer up immediately. This was much more like his way of doing things. He chose to mollify Iris.'Look,! know you don't like barging in and taking unnecessary risks...'

She gave him a warning glare, as if he was being sarcastic.

He went on, '...But why don't we just materialise ourselves on the other side of the mountain? Hmm? It would save so much bother - just a short jaunt.' He stared at her appraisingly.'Even my rackety old TARDIS can manage little jaunts.'

'So can mine; snapped Iris.'She's just temperamental sometimes.'

'Go on,' urged Sam.'Give it a go.'

They couldn't understand her reluctance to simply take them straight to their objective. So far they had played along with her, even pretending that this was just an old bus. But the days had come and gone and they had started to feel a new sense of urgency. It had crept up on them gradually and, the moment the road beneath them vanished - swallowed up, as Gila so decorously put it, by the voracious desert -they pressed their advantage and ganged up on Iris. She twisted and sighed and grew cross.

'All right; she said, caving in at last. She stomped back off to the cab. 'Don't blame me if it goes hideously wrong and we end up scrambled into a million shrieking particles...'

'We'll trust you,' the Doctor beamed.

She scowled at him and settled heavily back in the driving seat. 'Sit down, everyone,' she commanded. "This old thing doesn't travel as smoothly as some TARDISes you might be used to.'

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With that she started to twiddle the dials, flip down the necessary switches and conjure up the co-ordinates. She did it all with the stagey flourishes of a magician about to make his assistant vanish.

Flying blind, indeed. Didn't the others realise? They could wind up anywhere. They might find themselves teetering at the very summit of the tallest peak, or materialise encased in solid rock. Her safety mechanisms were permanently on the blink. She couldn't bring herself to tell everyone how little faith she actually had in her vessel. The Doctor might periodically bitch about his own ship, but at least he never had to worry about the things that kept Iris awake. Her last (and final) companion had fled her company, saying the bus was a flying deathtrap. The Doctor's might be an antiquated time vessel, but it wasn't a cut-price one, patched and cobbled together with spares picked up from all over the place. She remembered, with shame, fixing the dimensional stabilisers with a pair of laddered tights. She'd never got round to fixing them properly. Life seemed too short for routine repairs. Still...

'Here goes!' she yelled, and gave the dematerialisation lever a firm yank.

Sam, Gila and the Doctor held on tight to whatever came to hand. Everything that wasn't nailed or screwed down rattled, fell over or shot into the air. Outside, through the windows that hadn't been smashed and boarded up, or covered with useless maps, spun the endless aquamarine void of the space-time vortex. It seemed more immediate, Sam thought blearily, seeing it here in Iris's ship, rather than the Doctor's. Here, you felt you might just step out of the bus's pneumatic doors and plummet for ever into the airless, timeless mirage.

'I'm making up the precise co-ordinates,' Iris shouted, above the clattering in. 'Just like you said.'

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She was taking a perverse pleasure in this, thought the Doctor. Rubbing our noses in being forced to turn all devil-may-care.

That was when the bus went into a sickening nose dive and they were all flung against the walls. There was a painful cascade of cups, lamps, books, bottles and knick-knacks.

'I can't control it!' Iris screamed.'I knew this would happen. She hates short jaunts!'

'Do something!' the Doctor bellowed and fought to stand upright. He clung to the passenger straps and tried to haul himself towards the driver's cab as the bus bucked and jounced.

Time slowed when he reached her side. The two of them shouted at each other, while Gila and Sam were left sprawling behind in the mass of Iris's old belongings.

'Let me have a go,' the Doctor shouted at Iris.

She tried to slap his hands away.'You don't know her,' she cried, and started to jab at the controls.

'You'll run us aground; he warned.

They were careering madly. He stared into the coruscating maw of the vortex and found himself entranced. He never liked to look too hard. It was a null place, and yet full of multitudinous, mesmerising possibilities. It played tricks on him.

'We're ready,' said Iris nervously, her fingers twitching at the controls. 'I think we can rematerialise.'

She looked up then, and saw, with the Doctor, the wraithly figures clustered about the ship's exterior. The creatures pressed their insubstantial selves against the windscreen glass, mocking and flaunting and jeering. Their dead and empty eyes looked straight in at the passengers.

'Djinn,' said the Doctor. "They've come after us.'

'Right,' said Iris grimly, and plunged the relevant lever down. With a tremendous lurch and the familiar groaning of a TARDIS's engines wheezing into life, the whirling vortex about them seeped and bled away...

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... and was replaced by daylight once more.

Searing blue daylight that made their eyes ache and water, the second they lifted their battered, deafened heads.

'Safe!' Iris yelled and slapped the dashboard.'We did it!'

The mountains were behind them. They had come through.

Gila struggled through the mess to the very back of the bus, into the trashed kitchen, and shouted back that they were definitely over the mountains. Sam let out a whoop.'No climbing!'

'Hang on a second,' said the Doctor, staring outside.

They were perched on the lip of a sand dune. They had arrived in the foothills at the other end of the mountain range. But the bus was balanced precariously on the very lip of - and here Sam got to look out of the window and report the worst - 'A sixty-foot sheer bloody drop!'

It was a smooth, sand-blown one-in-ten.

The bus rocked slightly under their feet as they moved. Iris barked at them all to keep still.

'I knew something like this would happen! I told you all - I said, there's no safeguards against anything like this. We're lucky we haven't been dashed to pieces on the rocks - or worse.' She rounded on the Doctor.'This is your fault.You bullied me.'

'Stop hopping about,' he said, his tone deadly serious. 'If we dislodge the bus we could fall backwards all the way down that crest.'

They all fell silent.

The TARDIS's engines moaned and whispered, as if in protest. Now they could feel that steady, slow, seesawing motion, as if the bus was shilly-shallying.

The waited.

The Doctor made a decision.'Sam, Gila, come down here to the front of the bus. If we concentrate our weight down this end...'

They started to move.

There was a creak.

'Slowly!' the Doctor warned.'It's all about... equilibrium.'

At that point there was a despairing howl from the engines, and then they cut out completely.

"That's it!' said Iris. 'She's given up. She's gone into hibernation in shock. I told you she hates short jaunts. Her nerves won't stand for it.'

The bus was silent. No pacifying background hum. They could hear the tyres whisper as they tried to get a purchase on the sand. The shuffle of the ground beneath them was the only sound and it seemed deafening.

'I think we're all right,' the Doctor said.

Then the bus gave up the ghost and toppled backwards, over the dune's lip. For sixty feet they shot down the hill, plunging deep into the sand. All four were thrown off balance again, landing in a heap.

When all was still, they stirred themselves. The Doctor was first on his feet.'Anything broken?'

No one had broken anything. Gila was helping Sam to her feet, and she shook him off brusquely.

Iris went straight on the offensive. 'You've wrecked my ship! You've put us into a big bloody hole in the ground! This is down to your impatience, Doctor! I hope you're satisfied.'

She flung open the bus's doors and sand came rushing in. They were buried a foot deep. She hopped out, followed by Gila.

'I thought it was a good idea,' the Doctor told Sam.

'It was,' she said.'You weren't to know she had a rubbishy TARDIS.'

'She did warn me, though. And Iwas getting impatient.'

'Look,' Sam said. 'We're over the mountains, safe. She should thank you.'

'Iris won't see it like that," he said glumly, following the others outside. 'And I forgot. Iris likes to do things for herself. I shouldn't nave interfered.'

Sam tutted. The Doctor was erratic in deciding who to be tactful with.

They found Iris and Gila staring at the massive rise down which they had just plunged.

'We have to get all the way back up there,' Iris was saying sardonically. 'How do you suggest we manage that?'

'Fly?' said Sam.

'Not funny,' snapped Iris.

Gila grunted. 'We push it,' he said.

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Even with Gila's prodigious strength, they made little headway. He and Sam and the Doctor pitted their combined weight against the back of the bus and pushed for all they were worth. Iris had plonked herself back in the driver's cab, ostensibly to steer, but Sam couldn't see the point in that. She had been about to point out that they'd be better off with Iris's help in pushing, but the Doctor had caught her eye. He was wary of further aggravating the old woman. But after they had spent a fruitless, sweaty hour moving the bus precisely nowhere, he was shouting up to the front, 'Are you sure you've got the handbrake off?'

Iris bellowed something filthy at him.

She tried the engines again, which spluttered and coughed dolefully. Eventually they consented to turn the wheels a little, and the pushers got their hopes up slightly, as the tyres bit into the sand, and seemed at first to drag the vehicle a little way up the rise.

Great flurries of golden, jewelled sand were sent up into the air by the growling wheels. The Doctor produced, magician-like, a rope of handkerchiefs, for them to cover their noses and mouths as a small dust storm was kicked up around them. There was a terrible racket and, above it, came Iris's cry:'How are we doing, fellers?'

'Hopeless!' Gila shouted.'I think we're just digging it deeper into the sand.'

It was true, the bus was burying itself, even as it fought to be free. Iris switched off the engine.

She came stumping round to the back of the bus. She flung off her tiger-skin coat and rolled up her cardigan sleeves.'I'll have to have a go myself,' she said, giving them a bitter look, as if they hadn't been trying enough.

'It's stuck, Iris,' said the Doctor gently.'Don't push it.You'll do yourself a mischief'

'Are you saying I'm past it?' He tutted.'Well, help me everybody!'

Sam was slapping at her bare arms. 'I wish these insects would keep off.'

In the past hour they had been beset by over-large mosquitoes with violet wings. It was as if they had homed in on the stranded passengers. Sam said, 'Is it just me or are there more of them?'

The Doctor glanced around and then he stood very still.

Suddenly the air seemed thick with the things.

'We're being attacked,' he said, just as they became aware of how noisy the insects had grown.

'A swarm!' Iris gulped,and hurried back to her fur coat for protection. She clutched her head."They're in my hair!'

Only Gila, with his scabrous skin, seemed unaffected.

'Back inside!' the Doctor called.'Quickly!'

As they rounded the bus, however, they saw that the way to the doorway was blocked by a creature standing twice the Doctor's height. The very sight of it stopped them in their tracks. It was orange and muscled, and roaring with laughter, as the insects swarmed venomously around.

'It's a kabikaj,' the Doctor said.'A djinn of the insect world.'

Chapter Ten
Standing Around Virtually Naked

Kabikaj. It was less of a wraith than the other djinn they had so far seen on this trip. Less of a flesh-eater, a ghostly fly-by-night. The creature that confronted them in the heart of the swarm was corporeal and gross. It looked as if it could knock down any of their party with one easy blow. And it was still chuckling, low in its tautly muscled neck. The creature was like one whole muscle, Sam thought, dripping like something that had been basted for the oven. And it had its arms crossed, just like a genie in a pantomime.

The insects were getting to them. Sam felt as if she had been stung from head to toe. In a frantic moment she thought the beasts were scuttling into her head through her ears and nose, but that was mostly the noise - a torturous, incessant drone.

"They're being controlled by him, that creature,' roared Gila.'Make him stop!'

The Doctor raised his voice, slipping as he was occasionally wont to do, into imperious mode.'Are these things poisonous?'

The orange-skinned kabikaj threw back its head and laughed. Its lascivious features contorted with mirth.

'Don't give me that!' the Doctor shouted.'Answer!'

The djinn stopped laughing then and looked at him.

The Doctor was pleased.'They respond to commands, these djinn,' he told the others.'Like the genies in the old stories.'

'Do we get three wishes?' Sam asked.

'Not yet we don't,' said the Doctor grimly. 'Kabikaj, we demand safe passage through this your realm.'

"This realm,' said the creature, in sonorous tones, 'belongs to me and my workers.You have disturbed us with your ugly, ugly vehicle.'

'Ugly!' cried Iris.

'Leave this to me,' the Doctor warned her. 'Kabikaj, call off your workers and let us go safely.'

The djinn considered, and then snapped his fingers. Instantly the thousands of insects halted on the air. They were suspended, silent, in a great thick cloud. The Doctor sighed.

'If you disappoint me,' said the kabikaj,'I will set them free once more. Their stings are not fatal, but they will stay with you until your dying day. They are very faithful, my workers.' He folded his arms almost nonchalantly.

'Kabikaj,' said the Doctor. 'We are on a very important mission, sent by the Scarlet Empress, who will be very angry if we fail to carry it out.'

The djinn tossed his head. 'I care little for the Empress. Her grandmother held me captive for many decades. Her sort doesn't scare me.'

'Quite,' said the Doctor, licking his dry lips. He felt his skin burning where it had been stung.'Kabikaj, we ask three things of you.'

'Continue,' he said, seemingly amused.

"That you ask your workers to go about their far more profitable business of making honey. That you salve the stings we have already incurred. And that you lend your marvellous strength in helping us push our ugly, ugly vehicle back to the top of this sand dune.'

'And what,' said the Kabikaj,'will I receive in return for these favours?'

'Our undying gratitude?' asked the Time Lord hopefully.

'Undying anything from mortals is a waste of time,' observed the djinn philosophically.

'He's right, you know,'put in Iris.'I've often thought that.'

"Then, perhaps, a gift,' said the Doctor.

'A gift, mortal?'

'Don't call me mortal, please,' said the Doctor, shivering.'Yes... how

about...' He fiddled around in his capacious pockets. He produced a glob of pink jelly with tendons and suckers.'A Zygon... um, artefact?' The kabikaj snorted in derision.'A Dalek gun-stick?'

'I have no use for weapons.'

"Then how about... this?'And then the Doctor pulled out a sliver of blue crystal.

'A bauble?'

'No ordinary jewel. It is from Metebelis Three, in the Acteon galaxy.'

Iris shuddered. 'Don't go giving out blue crystals again. You know what happened last time.'

The Doctor ignored her.'As I say, this is no ordinary bauble. It is from the far future of Metebelis. It is a fossilised sliver of the mind of the Great One. The Queen of the Metebelian Spiders.'

'Give it to me,' urged the kabikaj.

The Doctor held the translucent fossil so that it caught the sun's glare and shone fabulously. Looking closely, they could see something moving, fluidly, deceptively, inside.

'I might own the mind of the Great One,' murmured the lumbering djinn.

'You might indeed,' said the Doctor.

'It's a deal,' grunted the creature, and snatched the crystal out of his hands.

'Doctor, where do you get all of that old tat?' asked Sam.

'Tell your pet plague to go home,' the Doctor told the kabikaj, who was dreamily inspecting his prize. The djinn snapped his fingers and the insects roared into instant life once more. But, as one, they turned and flew off into the desert. The air was still again.

'Our stings,' prompted the Doctor.

All their painful bumps and swellings disappeared.

'Now,' said Iris.'perhaps you'd get your friend to give us a lift up to the top.'

Even with the great brute's strength to help them, it still took a good part of the afternoon. But gradually, by agonising degrees, they made it. A few yards for every good, concerted shove, and Iris slammed on the handbrake while they regained their breath. Their progress was marked by the brake going on and her telling them how far they had yet to go. In these moments the kabikaj would absently take out his new prize and gaze at it.

Sam pulled the Doctor aside.

'I know what you're going to ask,' he said.

'What?'

'Not even I would be so ridiculous as to give that creature a piece of the Great Spider's mind. I picked that old thing up on the Portobello Road.'

'I wasn't going to ask that.'

'Oh. Never mind. Clever though, eh?'

'Shut up, hell hear you!'

'Not him. He's in love. What were you going to ask, Sam?'

'Why do you look so annoyed every time Iris tells us about the things she's gotten up to in the past?' His face went dark. 'You're not the only one allowed to get up to bizarre adventures, you know.'

'I know.'

'And another thing.You can't say she's interfering where she oughtn't to be, because -'

'I know,' he hissed. 'Look, I'll tell you later.'

'When she was telling us all about being involved with saving the Federation envoys trapped on Peladon you had a face like thunder last night.'

'Because,' he said gently,'because she's lying, Sam.'

'I'm not stupid. I'm assuming she's exaggerating a little bit. But -'

"Those things happened to me. She's stealing things that happened to me.'

With that, he went off back to the bus, and they all pitched in to cover the final, back-breaking few metres of their task. The Doctor even followed Gila's lead and took off his shirt, which startled Sam. The sun gleamed on his white back. His hair hung down in wet tangles.

Eventually, eventually, they made it.

The bus rested at the top of the rise.

They yelled for joy, and hugged each other.

'This is all you ask of me,' said the djinn.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, wiping sweat out of his eyes.

'Thank you, Doctor,' said the kabikaj solemnly.'You have given me the mind of -'

At this point Iris jumped out of her seat in the cab of the bus, caught her handbag strap on the handbrake, yanked it, and set the bus into unstoppable, terrible backward motion.

The others flew out of its path just in time.

Then they turned, horrified, to see it finish up where they had begun.

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It was midnight by the time they pushed it back. The kabikaj was persuaded to help them once more. It seemed bemused by their doings, as if they were simply amusing themselves.

For several hours no one spoke to Iris. Even the Doctor was too furious to trust himself to speak. They put their anger into the effort of getting the bus back to the top.

When they were finished Iris came to join them.

'What a day!' she laughed, and received a cold look from each in turn.

There was a whisper behind them, a flurry of sand, and they turned to see the kabikaj streak off into the night, clutching his prize jewel.

'I don't know about you,' said Gila.'but any kind of djinn gives me the creeps.'

'He was very good to us,' said the Doctor. He eyed Iris beadily. A very valuable, helpful addition to the team.'

Iris flushed. 'Put your clothes on, Doctor,' she said. 'You're standing around virtually naked.'

This time he blushed.

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Iris tried to make amends by searching around in her emergency food stores and laying on the most lavish meal of their journey so far. She brought course after course out from the bus, bearing them all on silver platters. The others were staggered, impressed and far more grateful than they felt she deserved. She served them roast duck and a whole series of piquant fruit sauces. Sam was content with the vegetables, which came glazed in honey, sprinkled with fresh rosemary and parsley. Impossible things accompanied her from her TARDIS kitchen. A giant meringue carved into an elegant, frosted swan. The four of them nibbled on a piece of its elegant neck each and considered the noises of the night around them.

'This side of the mountains,' said Gila,'is quite different to the other, the one we are used to. It is a much more dangerous place.'

'Great; muttered Sam.

'There's a village nearby,' said Iris. 'I thought we might head towards it tomorrow. Get supplies, get word of the Forest of Kestheven. Look out the best route.'

The Doctor shrugged. "That sounds sensible.' He was looking forward to

seeing some new people.

"The people here -' began Gila warningly.

'Gila,' Sam interrupted. 'Don't bother telling us. We'll find out for ourselves, all right?'

Not for the first time that day, Gila looked stung.

Chapter Eleven
I'm Entirely Credulous

Many years ago the town of Fortalice had given up on the idea of progress. The people there were a law unto themselves. They had decided that since they were a mere isolated community on the mountain slopes, they were accountable to no one and need never pay heed to the rest of the world. This community could decide for itself the way in which it would live.

When the people of Fortalice realised this, that nothing held them back from doing precisely what they desired, theirs was a curious sense of freedom. No tyrants or monarchs shackled them. No laws to speak of. All that held them back, they felt, was a sham idea of progress.

A few individuals started to ask some awkward questions.

Why do things have to change? Who said so? If greater wisdom, fortitude, and brutality were the things that really enabled people to live better lives, then so be it. The Fortaliceans were all in favour of enjoying their lives. But as far as they could see, or rather, as far as their various thinkers could see, there was very little to be gained by being clever, stronger or more ruthless than anyone else.

They had everything they needed. They had all the space they could want. Their technology was of sufficient quality to extract their requisite moisture from the earth and air. Their crops were regular and untainted. Their single library contained precisely one thousand and one volumes, which was the aggregate of all the knowledge they would ever require. Satisfied with themselves and what they knew, the Fortaliceans drew in their reins and happily lowered their horizons. The rest of this world was a dirty, dangerous place anyway, and they had no pressing wish to investigate further.

Generations grew, and grew satisfied that they knew all there was to know about their own world. Everyone learned the same things and that was enough. They weren't a nosy or inquisitive race and this, they felt, saved them from the roving insecurities and dissatisfactions of everyone else. The Fortaliceans believed in their seasons, their ritual festivities, the consoling regularity of the sky's diurnal round. When unlucky visitors from less enlightened races happened to stagger into their oasis of calm, how unhappy these outsiders seemed. They were always choked with a

myriad unfulfillable desires for knowledge and conquest and love.

Effectively, what the Fortaliceans had done was to conquer their own appetites, and they reckoned that it was just as well.

Generally, those hapless wayfaring visitors were put out of their miseries. Their appetites were mercifully quashed by the Executioner, a man who lived alone in the town and, although he was not their leader, he decreed who would be burned, hanged, quartered and generally slaughtered. These tasks fell to him by default, he being the only individual suited to these grisly tasks. His personality was fitted for and therefore given over to the removal of unwanted persons. In the tight human economy of Fortalice, the Executioner had his circumscribed place, as did everybody else.

This afternoon the Executioner was in his element. It was their summer solstice. This was the afternoon of the Grand Fracas, which took place at this appointed time every year.

He sat back in his tower and watched the townspeople rally around and organise their various factions, preparing to come out drunkenly into the streets and get on with the ritual. A terrible, ominous air of carnival hung over the town. Grimly, the Executioner anticipated his busman's holiday.

Time in Fortalice was circular. No year any different from the last. The special days came and went and no one thought they would ever change. There were days to long for and days to dread, but there was no escaping any of them.

Naturally it was to this town that Iris's dusty, worn-out bus brought her party, in search of rest and nourishment, just as the Grand Fracas was about to break out.

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The first thing they did was split up. The Doctor's idea. Gila was to search out provisions with Sam, Iris was to go talking to townspeople to find out what word-of-mouth warnings, oracular wisdoms and local dangers they might expect to encounter, and the Doctor was to head for the library in the town square where they had parked. He was going in search of proper, accurate maps.

'This splitting-up lark,' said Iris as they stood beside the bus.'Don't you

think you should have learned your lesson by now?'

He was staring into the sky. It looked dark and heavy. The air was full of static cling. There was a storm approaching.'What do you mean?"

'Oh, come off it, Doctor. Splitting up has never done you much good in the past. It means you end up running around after each other once whatever disaster to befall everyone has... befallen. It's how all of these affairs get out of hand. There's safety in numbers.'

He grew exasperated.'And everything takes four times as long. No, my plan's best.'

'You just enjoy having to come and rescue everyone.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Splitting up indeed,' muttered Iris mutinously.

'How do you know, anyway?' he snapped.'How do you know how I operate?'

'I've seen enough.'

As they drifted off on their planned individual missions, Sam reflected that Iris was actually right. It was only when they were apart that the Doctor and his companions had the worst stuff happen to them. Not for the first time she wondered if he actively courted danger. He liked to tempt chaos out from the shadows.

'We've not got much of the local currency,' said Gila.'And I doubt they take it here, anyway.'

He and Sam went looking for a marketplace.'Beg, borrow or steal,' said Sam.'That's always the contingency plan.'

'You're very resourceful.'

'Don't patronise me.'

'I wouldn't dream of it.' He was laughing at her. Let him. She still didn't trust him an inch.

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The Doctor went into the library carrying a book of his own. As he hurried up the dusty steps to the sun-faded portico he worried vaguely that some fussy librarian might decide that he had stolen the AJa'tb from those very shelves and forcibly confiscate it. On the long nights of this journey the Doctor had found this mysterious book oddly consoling and he wouldn't want to be parted from it. It was a ludicrous, preposterously knocked-together anthology of improbable adventures and he liked it a lot. Its leather cover was smooth under his fingers as he hugged it protectively to him. He remembered the story inThe Arabian Nights about the pages of writing that were impregnated with poison. Maybe this archaic text was drugging him each time he read from it, and traced the words with his eyes and fingertips.

The library windows were dark. Perhaps it was shut or abandoned. The stone sign that used to read LIBRARY above the pillars was decipherable enough to denote the building's function, but the letters were chipped and effaced. Only the T stood out with any clarity.

He stepped inside the building's merciful chill and here, apparently waiting for him, he found the first resident of Fortalice that any of his party had yet encountered.

He was a thin man, with skin stretched taut over bone and eyes that stared unblinking from across the marble counter as the Doctor strolled in. The librarian's hands, his dry, white, twiggy ringers, tapped a rapid tune on the uncluttered desk. To the Doctor, the man looked as if he didn't get out much.

They said their good mornings and the still, cavernous interior of the building gathered up their words. There was no other sound here - a relief to the Doctor, after his several rather noisy days.

'I'm new here,' the Doctor began.

'I know,' said the librarian. He was in a spotless black suit with a high collar. He hardly seemed to breathe.

'Am I that conspicuous?'

'I know all of the residents of Fortalice,' said the librarian. "They all come here.You are not a resident.You were not educated here.'

"That's quite true, but I'm willing to make up for lost time.'

'Are you?'

'Yes, you see, I tend to move around rather a lot in my line of work, and I like to keep up with local culture, history, customs... and maps.'

'We have everything here.'

'Everything?'

'Everything that there is to be known in Fortalice. There is nothing else.' For the first time the librarian became almost personable. 'All one thousand and one books are kept here,' he said with pride.

'That many, eh? You see, what I'm interested in, primarily, is -'

'Your interests are of no consequence here, I'm afraid,' said the thin man.'You have asked for the knowledge of our town and I will give it. Beginning with Book One, the First Book of the Self, and then we may progress from there.'

The Doctor frowned.'Are you proposing to give me a reading list?'

"The only reading list,' said the librarian sharply.'Surely you don't want to start anywhere other than the beginning?'

'But I don't want to know everything! Just the bits I need! I need maps and charts. I need to learn the lie of the land.'

"That knowledge will come in due course.You will, however, learn the lie of this land only. That is all you will learn.'

'That could take months!' The Doctor waved his arms, dismayed. 'Look, I'm a great skimmer. I can get through anything you care to give me at a rate of knots. I skim so fast sometimes I don't even know what I'm reading. Can't you just -'

'I can educate you, as I educate all Fortaliceans. This is how we work.'

'How long does it last?'

'Twenty years.'

'Impossible! Show me your maps.'

'You are a very impatient person.'

'And you,' the Doctor bridled, 'are an impossible man.' He glared at the librarian, who, at last, blinked. 'I see it now,' said the Doctor slowly. 'My impetuosity appals you. YouVe forced yourself to think like every other Fortalicean.You are beholden to a system of understanding the absolute order of things. The ranking of all empirical knowledge.' The Doctor came out of his little trance with a smile, hoping the librarian would be impressed by his surmise.'But you don't really believe that possible, do you?'

'I believe that the knowledge assembled here is all there is.'

'I can see in your face that you don't.'

'I must,' said the librarian furiously.

'There will always be gaps. There have to be gaps in what is known. How else can you find out anything new?'

'We don't care for the new here.'

'Ah yes. Another village of torch-bearing monster-baiting killers, all superstitious, all unruly mob-mentality, all misrule and xenophobia. Splendid.'

'We prosper.'

'I don't doubt it. Just tell me what I need to know.'

The librarian considered.'You are free to... look where you like.'

'I believe the word you want is browse. I am free to browse, to skim, to sample, pluck, rummage, unpick, deconstruct, misread and in general randomly choose what I want from your splendid - if rather limiting -one thousand and one volumes. Is that it?'

'On your own head be it.'

"Thank you,' said the Doctor, and marched off into the main body of the library.

There was no one indoors reading or learning today. No one was being forced to digest, page by page, text after text, the supposed complete knowledge of Fortalice. Really, the whole thing was preposterous. Even given such a systematic, doctrinaire workload, not every Fortalicean would learn the same material. They didn't stand a chance. The Doctor reflected that he himself absorbed only part of what he read, and remembered less. Frayed ends stuck out everywhere, to be picked up and ravelled out on a second, later reading, while the previous assertions and reflections laded away or attached themselves to other parts of his thinking. No two Fortaliceans could possibly have the same knowledge. Not of this world, or a single body of knowledge. They couldn't read a single sentence in the same way. No one could.

By the time he came to the ranks of bookcases on which the thousand and one volumes were carefully laid, he had the whole enterprise put down - in his own mind, at least - as a patent absurdity.

As was the series of headings under which volumes one to a thousand and one were categorised. He read the white placards aloud: 'The Self, Temporality, the Referential Gap, Ambiguity, Undecidability, Rhetoric, and Objects (Ordered).'

He wondered where he ought to begin. He was tempted to have a nose around the Referential Gap, thinking that perhaps the Fortaliceans were more aware of the problems and lacunae to do with language and knowledge than they were letting on.

But all I want, he thought, is a nice plain map to tell me how to get to Kestheven.

He plucked outAmbiguity , Volume Two and its first sentence ran, 'Should the Forest of Kestheven exist?' It continued:

Should the Forest of Kestheven exist it should consist of the following unknowable and unaccountable objects and beings, all of which are outlawed and decried in this realm. It is an entirely fictitious region of deciduous woodlands, and any resemblance to any living and true Fortalicean space is entirely coincidental. Located some one hundred fathomless miles from the exact centre of this town. This text exists to establish and verify, the plain impossibility, the ludicrous unknowability of

Kestheven, by illuminating and ordering every one of its properties and purported essences.

The Doctor hurried over to a stark wooden bench to read.

***

Sam had chosen four apples from a basket in the market. 'Not those four,' said the sombre-looking woman under an immense sun hat. "Those four are reserved.'

'They're the same as all the others!' Sam protested, and the woman shook her head.

'You are free to choose from the remaining fruit.' She snatched the four apples away.

Actually, the rest were all bruised and withered-looking. Sam had taken the pick of the bunch. Sighing, she rummaged in the basket.'Who reserves apples?'

'Everyone does,' she was told.

When Sam met up with Gila later, he had bought six plump, scarlet fish. He carried them wrapped in damp brown paper. Each had a label attached. "They've all got names,' he said, laughing.

'Are all the towns here as weird as this?' Sam asked him.

'Oh, yes,' he said.

***

As the day advanced the atmosphere thickened and curdled. The air was almost too humid and green to breathe as the storm gathered force and small collectives prepared for the impending fracas in the town's various drinking holes. The Doctor's party went their different ways, attracting stares and mutters. Blithely they got on with their business, but all the while the locals were taking note of them, labelling them as visitors, and letting them go safely, knowing full well that when violence broke out - as it certainly would this afternoon - that the visitors would be taken care of.

Iris had found herself a corner table in a dark, smoky tavern, where a horde of ill-dressed men were getting drunk. Unconcerned, she put her feet up and ordered a thin, noxious, local brew which came to her in a brass pot, set down unceremoniously by the barmaid, who gave the old woman a scathing look. Iris rolled herself a number of lumpy and tatty cigarettes and coolly surveyed the clientele. She thought about doing so with her camcorder, but thought better of it. Everyone was wearing a shaggy fur and an old hat at a rakish angle. Some even wore eyepatches. It had been months since Iris had found herself in such insalubrious company and she got goose-flesh at the thought.

The barmaid was in a sheer blue dress and she came tottering over to Iris to refill her jug of foul wine. She told her.'You have lousy timing, you know.'

'I know,' Iris sighed.

'Visitors here get a hard time any day of the year. Don't you know what today is?' Iris must have looked blank. 'It's the annual brawl. The big fracas. The solstitial fisticuffs in the streets. When everyone with a grudge or a secret niggle against their neighbour comes out to let off steam by laying into whoever they can get their hands on. It's murder out there today.'

'I've never been here before,' said Iris worriedly.

'An old woman like you shouldn't be alone today.'

'I can look after myself.'

'Not when this lot have drunk themselves stupid. Every year it's a bloodbath.'

Iris tutted. She wished she'd come armed.

'It's traditional,' said the woman.

'And they don't even use football as a pretext?'

'I don't follow you.' The barmaid looked impatient, and busily fluffed up her tangle of red hair.'Are you alone here?'

'My friends are all shopping...'

'You'd do well to round them up before it breaks out. And before the Executioner realises you're here.'

Iris drained her wine. 'Executioner? This place doesn't get any more alluring, does it?'

'You've come on the worst possible day.'

'Story of my life,' shrugged his as she opened up the battered carpet bag she'd brought with her, and brazenly stole the brass wine jug.TU be off, then.'

'For a price,' said the woman,'I could show you a place to hide.'

Faces were watching them now. A low grumble set up around Iris as she wedged herself between backs, heading for the door. 'No thanks, I've got my own -' his stopped. The air around her had become cloying and dark. She came over all clammy. She was going to be ill again, she realised, used to similar attacks. This was worse than usual and, as she looked back at the barmaid, she felt her knees give out. IVe been drugged, she decided and very carefully said,'I have a double-decker bus all of my own.' Then she pitched head first on to the filthy wooden floor.

All the men in the bar cheered and clapped. The barmaid smirked and briskly wiped down Iris's abandoned table, and then leaned over the old woman's prone bulk to retrieve the wine vessel from her bag.

'You'll get a good price for a visitor,' someone called out to her.

'I'll ask for the body back after the festival,' the woman laughed.'How about we get her stuffed and mounted and hung over the bar?'

More shouts and roars of approval.

The barmaid sent a boy out to tell the Executioner of her prize.

***

The Doctor was reading about the golden bears that allegedly shaved their priceless fur and lived in thrall to a woman who possessed great necromantic wisdom. The bears of Kestheven supposedly lived in peace in their woodlands, in an apparently grotesque re-enactment of a

civilised urban society. All of the above, the Doctor read, was untrue. It was an unsubstantiated fabrication, imposed upon the Fortaliceans by evil dissenting visitors, who also didn't - in any real sense - exist.

It was frustrating work. Whenever he read a paragraph that actually described something concrete, the following one would neatly undermine and dismantle every particle of its truth value. The bears of Kestheven were trimmed into non-being as tidily as they seemingly did away with their own golden fur. The sorceress who ruled them was a fiction also, he learned. At this rate these books would end up convincing him - yes, even him, he thought, glumly - that absolutely nothing existed.

'Are you learning anything to your advantage?'

He looked up to see the librarian standing patiently before him. He grinned, seeing that unmistakable twinkle of curiosity in the man's eyes.

'Lots,' said the Doctor.'I'm only reading the good bits. Not the boring bits about epistemology and truth value.'

The librarian looked shocked. "There needs to be a hierarchy of truths. Your education will be incomplete.'

'Good!' the Doctor laughed. 'I despise hierarchies. And especially hierarchies of truths. I like to make my own mind up, and that's what I intend to do with the Forest of Kestheven. As far as I'm concerned, everything is as true as anything else, until I see it with my own eyes. And even then there's still room for doubt.' He stood up.'See? I'll believe anything. I'm entirely, entirely credulous.'

'A fool.'

'Perhaps. But I want to meet these golden bears and their necromantic queen.'

'You can't. They don't exist.'

'I think they do.You can't always believe what you read in books, you know.'

'You can believe in everything you read here. We describe these hypothetical creatures only to deny their possibility.'

'Yes, and I'm going to meet them.' He closed Volume Two ofAmbiguity with a resounding bang.'See if I don't. What's your name?'

'Gharib.'

'Shall I bring back a lock of golden hair to prove them to you?'

Gharib tutted and started to move away. Perhaps, he thought, the Doctor was dangerous.

'On Earth,' the Doctor said, 'a world whose existence I am sure you have a volume to refute, there once lived the last man to have read every book then in circulation. He was called Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his keeping up with everything never did him much good. Not as far as I could see. He kept filling asleep, dreaming and forgetting his poems. He was the last of that type. The last genuine universal expert. Everyone else, I am afraid, is a pretender to that state.' He straightened his green jacket.'I'm going now.'

'You've finished already?'

'I know everything I need to know.'

When the Doctor started to walk back to the main doors the librarian became flustered and - as expected - called him back.

'I will show you the maps. They're up in the tower.'

The Doctor turned to him.'I knew you'd succumb to my charm.'

Gharib's shoulders were slumped. 'They would punish me for showing you. Maps are hated here. We aren't meant to look at them.'

'You aren't meant to broaden your horizons, I suppose?'

'Not just that.' Gharib led him to an alcove, where stone steps led upward in a narrowing spiral. 'A complete, finished map of the world would be absolute knowledge to be undermined and categorically refuted. But maps are never complete, nor fully accurate. They cannot be. A map is an admission of knowledge's defeat. Something always slips the cartographer's notice. A map is always provisional. A map is a celebration of the provisional, if you like.' Gharib looked feverishly

excited as he recounted this heresy. 'It is a record of the widening, boundless world, of the fusion of the known and the yet-to-be-known. That is why we are meant to hate maps here.'

'Personally,' said the Doctor, following him happily up the tower's smooth steps,'I rather like them.'

***

By mid-afternoon Gila and Sam had finished loading the bus with the provisions they would need for a couple of weeks. The produce - especially the strange-looking vegetables - was poor and sickly looking. No wonder the locals seemed malnourished. They had done their best, however, and had haggled and bartered and even traded in various trinkets and pieces of electronic circuitry that they had found in the boot of the bus.

'I hope we didn't give away anything Iris wanted to keep,' said Sam.

'Serve her right if we did,' Gila muttered.

They were attracting even more notice now, as a crowd started to assemble in the town square. It was a rabble, chuntering all around

them. 'Something's up,' Sam observed. 'Maybe we should wait aboard the

bus.' A rock was flung and it hit Gila squarely on the back. He spun around

snarling.

'It was him,' Sam pointed. A man they had bought bread from. They had paid him with what Gila had called 'a partially dismantled and useless etheric-beam locator'. The man had almost bitten off his fingers in his greed for the exotic-looking object. He had stowed the device away, pushed the loaves into their arms, and shooed them out of his shop. Now he was hurling rocks at them. A few more were thrown, rattling against the bus. A skirmish broke out within the burgeoning crowd.

"This looks nasty,' said Sam.

'Get aboard,' hissed Gila.

Then, as if at some prearranged signal, the mob descended on them.

Chapter Twelve
Queen of Misrule

For quite some time she had known she was very ill. This body had lasted a good long while and Iris had settled happily into it, knowing its shape, textures, its limits and the way it felt to be her. She almost felt mortal. Fatter and slower was what she had become, though the word she preferred was seasoned. It was with a certain amount of pride that she reflected on the fact that her current incarnation had outlasted and seen out five of the Doctors. Or should that be 'five of the Doctor's', with an apostrophe? What a difference a single apostrophe could make, she thought. That tiny fleck of punctuation denoted the exact difference between regarding the Doctor as separate, though mysteriously interconnected, beings, and seeing them as manifestations of one core, essentially unchanging being. That apostrophe expressed the precise ontological quandary of these lives that she and the Doctor endured.

Iris was given to thinking along lines such as these. They were the things she mulled over as she allowed herself to drift, whenever a bad bout in her illness cropped up. And they were happening with greater frequency nowadays. She would draw into herself, pulling upon reserves of strength to weather out the disease and its effects. A month ago she had woken on the top deck of the bus to find that she had been unconscious for three days. When she discovered this she'd become frightened for the first time.

She ached all over, she passed out periodically, her hearts sometimes beat wildly out of synch. Sometimes she could hardly breathe, or felt that she had forgotten how to.

This is ridiculous, she thought. I have a TARDIS. I can seek the best medical help that has ever existed, anywhere. Somewhere in the cosmos there must be someone who can help me. And yet she put it all to the back of her mind, letting other, random concerns take her thoughts off her ailments. She'd done this until she discovered that she had lain unconscious for those three nights, suspended in the vortex. That had convinced her that she wasn't getting any better. Radical measures needed to be taken. And so she had come to Hyspero.

Iris wasn't afraid of death. In her travels she had faced it many times. Almost daily, in fact. She had encountered quite as many tinpot dictators, conspirators and deadly assassins as the Doctor. She had a

greater sense of self-preservation than the Doctor, however, never quite endangering herself for the sake of others as he seemed to relish doing. When the time came to relinquish this life and to pass almost seamlessly into the next, she would greet that new self with gusto.

Only a few days ago, as they shared the cab of the bus, Sam and Iris had discussed this. Sam asked if Iris ever worried about dying. A shiver passed through the old woman as if a goose had walked over her grave, but she told Sam, 'I know that, in the end, I'll be all right. For a while, anyway.' She grinned. 'Remember I told you that I met my other selves, once? We were summoned, seven of us, against our wills to a terribly bleak, gladiatorial wilderness on Gallifrey. We were transported by the horrid revenants of Morbius. All us girls got together, put our heads together, in order to get ourselves out of the mess. I was number five - still am, in fact, and I had the pleasure of meeting my number six. I'm not supposed to remember this, but there you are, I do. So I know that I survive, in one timeline, at least. She's a gorgeous, slinky sex kitten, looks about thirty in human terms, with masses of honey-blonde hair. She was in a shiny plastic bikini cut very daringly, and thigh-length boots. She had a look of Jane Fonda about her.' Sam had seemed impressed.

What Iris hadn't told her was that if this disease continued at its present rate and ended up annihilating every cell of Iris's current body, then there wouldn't be anything left of her to regenerate into that next, voluptuous self. Everything would be changed.

She woke, with a jolt, in a dank cell, somewhere beneath the home of the Executioner of Fortalice. She gasped with pain. Dreaming of her illness again, she thought ruefully. It filled all her waking moments, too, until sometimes, recently, she had wanted to grab the Doctor by his velvet lapels and scream at him.'I'm dying,you fool! Stop blathering and save me!' Something always held her back. She had to get on with her mission. It was her only hope.

And now someone, or something, had taken her prisoner. Worse, she was alone. No one to help unshackle her, to help unpick the locks on the cell door, to come padding down the labyrinthine corridors that no doubt led away from this room. No one.

Her head still throbbed from whatever had laced that horrid wine.

'Let me out!'she wailed.

The door clicked and slid open.

She sat up and found herself unbound. Pulling her cardigan into shape, she stepped cautiously out into a stone hallway, lit by candles that dripped down the elaborate ironwork. Standard, dungeony accoutrements, she mused.

She listened. Through the thick sandstone walls she could hear the various noises of a crowd. The voice of the mob - jubilation and dismay. Somewhere there was a riot going on, and she had a negligent jailer. She crept along the passageway, turning left at the corner, and left and left and left again. She decided firmly that she no longer enjoyed just her own company. Creeping about wasn't the same with no one to hiss at. Perhaps Sam could be persuaded to defect from the Doctor's side.

More candles guttering in the lurid gloom.

Anything could step out of the shadows, but Iris was used to anything. She and anything were old, old friends.

When she came to the room with the window above the town and the man who stood watching the fracas below, she wasn't surprised. He was her negligent jailer - a squat, ugly man in a vest and a cowled hood. He turned and gave her a sickly grin, from which many of the teeth were missing.

'You're awake,' he said. She nodded curtly. 'Come and see the bloodshed,' he urged. "This time they are really going for it. I'd be surprised if half the townsfolk aren't dead by nightfall.'

She found herself standing beside him at the parapet.

Below, the town of Fortalice had turned on itself. She could see perhaps a square mile of streets, all teeming with life, the details smudged with dust and a bewildering surge of bodies in motion. Bodies were being flung and strewn everywhere, bodies were being battered and torn apart by the bare hands of other bodies, which were pitching themselves heedlessly into the bloody melee. There were no sides or factions, as far as Iris could make out. Bodies fought the bodies beside them in a cacophonous and promiscuous Bosch-like vista.

Above the din she asked her captor,'Have they all gone loopy?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It is that day in the year when the Fortaliceans are permitted to go mad.'

'I take it you're the Executioner.'

'That is my function. Come with me, please.'

She snorted.'No thanks.'

'But you have your public to face.'

'My public?'

'You are the Queen of this misrule. A visitor. The quintessence of everything we deplore.You are subversion itself.'

He led her away from the view. She followed warily.'So?'

'So you must be crowned before the people. Your spectacle will still their... boisterousness.'

'I see,' said Iris and he led her downstairs. His quiet manner had subdued her. There was something so dark and unassuming about him that she didn't feel at all threatened. It was as if she was talking to nobody at all.

***

There hadn't been time to get into the bus. From what Sam had already seen of Iris's ship, she wasn't confident that it would protect them against the mob. Instead they were submerged in the surging mass of angry bodies. She and Gila were separated. Sam concentrated on pushing her own assailants away, on ducking and weaving through their mass. They were clumsy and drunk. The air, she realised, stank of drink. Breathlessly, fired with adrenaline, she fought through them, looking for an escape route. During her travels she had learned a thing or two about hand-to-hand combat. The Doctor, of course, frowned on the hasty use of weaponry, but he himself wasn't averse to using his fists when the situation called for it. Sam sent a few of her attackers reeling with a series of desperate blows.

A gap opened up around her; the townspeople drew back, seeing the

short work she had made of the men who had thought her an easy target. She paused, panting, wiping a trickle of blood from her mouth and found that the atmosphere had infected her. She was jubilant and spoiling for more. Through the gap she saw that Gila was bearing the brunt of the crowd's hatred. Because of his difference they piled on to him. He was marked as foreign to them, as a monster, and they vented the full force of their disgust and fear by concentrating on him. Gila raged and tore at them, pulling unruly drunks off his back and shoulders, but sheer weight of numbers was dragging him down. A great cry went up as he fell and disappeared under a heap of filthy townspeople.

Sam fought to get to him, screaming blue murder.

As she reached the fallen Gila and pitched into battle once more, she caught a glimpse of a great gout of flame from the front of the bus. Cries, shrieks, howls of dismay. The crowd fell back. Those holding GUa down and those kicking at his helpless form looked up and saw a woman approaching them. She was armed with what appeared to Sam to be a slim and active flame-thrower.

'Let the lizard go,' said the woman coolly. She was in blue robes, like a Renaissance Madonna. Her face gleamed with sweat and conviction. The thrower belched another burst of flame, which rolled above their heads.

Sam stopped in her tracks and felt the sweat stand out on her arms. She turned to see that the others had shrunk back and away from her.

'Leave these two alone,' the woman commanded, and there was little or no argument from the Fortaliceans. She looked like a nun, Sam decided, as she was called over to help drag the wounded Gila out of the dirt.

'His injuries are superficial,' the woman told her.'Come with me.'

Gila leaned heavily on Sam, his rough hide scraping her skin. She winced as the woman led them, cutting a swathe through the stunned crowd with further hissing splashes of bright flame.

The blue-robed woman was taking them to the temple in the far corner of the square, Sam saw. Sanctuary.

***

'I must go down to them,' said the Doctor impulsively, pulling away from the ledge, high in the library, above the square.

Gharib shook his head. "They are already rescued, Doctor. Our Lady of the Flowers has got them. They are under her protection now.'

The Doctor stalked about the map room, muttering to himself.'How could I be so stupid? Letting them all wander off on a day like this.'

'You weren't to know,' the librarian said. 'You're a visitor.' He smiled gently at the Doctor now, as if warming to him at last. There was something appraising in that glance, too, as he looked his guest up and down.

From far below - they had clambered into the highest turret of the library - the noise of the street riot was resuming.

'And Iris is out there somewhere.'

Gharib was heaving open thin drawers, one after another, sending up great fans of blue dust.'You came here to see these. I am risking my life to show you them. Before you go, you might as well look.'

The Doctor hurried over. 'Have you got those maps with monsters drawn all around the edges? Sea beasts and dragons and mermaids lurking on the margins? I always liked those.'

Gharib slid out sheet after sheet of charts. 'All our maps are like that. Because everything in the margins, just out of sight of the still, calm centre, is monstrous.'

'Anything you say,' muttered the Doctor, and started to pore over the maps, with his nose about an inch from their surface.

***

She was that rare thing in FortaJice: a visitor they had spared and allowed to live in the town among them. Over ten years ago she had wandered out of the hills in her blue robes and marched heedlessly into the town square.

There was something about her that made the people stop and stare. She was calm, resolute, staring back at them, her face unlined,

unmarked by time and anxiety. Neither were the faces of the Fortaliceans, existing as they did in their eternal round of self-renewal, but they were weathered by their environment, by the scathing, perennial desert storms. Our Lady, as they came to call her, seemed to them to be pure. The elements seemed never to have touched her or had a bearing upon her. Yet she claimed to have come from the mountains, to have lived there all her life. Some said that she had been raised by wolves, others said by angels. Whatever her story - and Our Lady was never very forthcoming - they spared her and let her live in their temple, an empty and neglected edifice of onion domes and broken spires. They had forgotten its original function and so Our Lady was allowed to take it for herself, which she did, wordlessly, as if it were her due.

There was a talent that Our Lady had, alongside her beguiling purity, that prompted the Fortaliceans and their then current Executioner to keep her as their prize. In this arid, thwarted land, she had the knack of cultivating the most extraordinary plant life. She came here with nothing but, almost as soon as she was installed in the ruined temple, she set about provoking an unprecedented growth of vegetation. She specialised in exotic flowers - useless, flaunting, ostentatious creations which crammed inside the inner courtyards, the cells, the passageways and the whole vast interior chambers of the dank building.

The Fortaliceans drew closer to see what she had accomplished in her short time here. The rest of the town lay as barren and dusty as ever, but within the temple of Our Lady there thrived and rustled a monstrous cornucopia. Thorned vines festooned with roses reached to the domed ceilings, and swagged down to snare the unwary. Lily heads like trumpets, gilded and glistening with mysteriously perfumed dew, thrust themselves out of the gloom, and anemone heads the size of the local, stunted cabbages furled their secrets to themselves and exuded a cloying scent - and it was this that pulled the townsfolk in. But it also revolted them, this smell and this display, with its hint of longings for times and places other than their own. Plants that gave forth their gaudiness and their scents colonised the whole interior; it seethed with life. It was said that those who sneaked in to visit the temple rarely came out again. The Executioner of that time decreed that none of his people should venture into that seductive, vegetative realm.

Our Lady of the Flowers hardly ever emerged. She sat in her jade factory and let the various desert breezes take the dangerous smells of her flourishing home to seep through the town.

Slowly, and by degrees, the endlessly pragmatic, phlegmatic Fortaliceans came to worship her. They brought their wares to honour her, laying samples of their own pathetic cultivation at her steps. Pumpkins like death's heads, onions like rocks. These withered tributes would vanish overnight and be replaced in the morning - as if some alchemical change had occurred through the intervening hours - by the most scandalously ripe and tempting fruits that had ever been found in this region. The populace would fall upon these wares with abandon, breaking out in violence for Our Lady's favours. Sometimes the fruit would be squashed and ruined in the kerfuffle. Our Lady had a particular talent for pomegranates.

***

'Doesn't talk much, does she?'

They had been left in a small, overgrown chamber. The light was shot through with green. As Sam sat herself down on damp stone to wait, she thought she could even hear the chlorophyll chugging through the fat, translucent veins of the plants around her. Now she was safe here, safe from the crowd, she was glad to relax and soak up the contemplative stillness.Yet she was still stirred up and spoiling for a fight. She dipped a hand into the dark pool by which they had been left and ran it through her blonde hair, enjoying the silvery cool.

The pool dappled what could be seen of the stone walls with eerie, subterranean light.

Our Lady had gone, swallowed up by the green.

Gila lowered himself into the water. It was so thick with weed, with a bottomless, viscous opacity, that for some moments Sam could see nothing of him but a reassuring trail of tiny, joyful bubbles. Sam was reminded of hippos in the zoo, and of tramping around with her parents

- both of whom were outspokenly appalled at the senselessness of keeping intelligent creatures in paddocks. There had been three hippos face down in water, bobbing slowly like leathery, obese horses, taking it in turns to suddenly plunge to the bottom of their filthy pool. Sam had taken bets with her parents - who were fascinated despite themselves

- over which hippo would sink itself next. They operated in a tacit,

obscure rotation system, and emerged violently, with green water pouring from their colossal, tusked jaws. Sam had stood too close, of course, hypnotised by their awesome power.

Gila came splashing out of the water now, raising great spumes of froth, reminding her of his own strangeness. His hide and his narrowed, avaricious eyes were gleaming, making him seem every inch an alligator man.

'Whoever she is, we owe her one,' he said.

'What was going on out there? That mob was fighting itself as much as us.'

Gila lay back on the stone floor and shrugged carelessly. 'Some kind of local festival. I told you, the people out here are very odd.'

'At least they took notice of her.' Sam smiled at the absurdity. She'd never been rescued before by a flame-throwing nun.

They were met then by two children. There was a rustling behind them and two ragged figures appeared through the gaps. They were dirty and their eyes seemed almost all black.

'Uh-oh.' Sam stood up.'Village of the Damned, here we come.'

'Our Lady wishes to see you now,' said the girl, gazing with ill-concealed curiosity at the pair of them.

They allowed themselves to be led into the main body of the temple and here the jungle growth was, if anything, more rampant. As the ceiling grew domed and receded ever higher, they could see whole thick-boled trees blocking the view, their branches thrust up and sending out sprays of massive, dripping leaves, which were stirring with unseen life.

Also, as Gila and Sam were taken to see their rescuer, they realised that the interior forested space was full of children. They were peered at from between dark spaces in the shrubberies and overrun groves. Those black eyes were everywhere, watching them with a stilled, frightened mirth.

'I take it back about Village of the Damned,' said Sam.'It's Munchkin Land.'

Gila snapped,'I wish you wouldn't keep making offwortd references. How would you like it if I went nattering on about Ibn-Al-Nadim, or the Aja'ib ?'

'Sorry,' Sam said. It hadn't occurred to her that no one on Hyspero would have seenThe Wizard ofOz . She assumed everyone had seen it, or at least some other, region-specific version. In her recent travels she had taken to noticing the varying myths and tales and their common roots as they sprang out, seemingly independently in all times and places. The Doctor was a great fan of these congruencies in folklore - he said the native Chelonian version of Cinderella had to be seen to be believed.A thought struck her.'Hey,! know what theAja'ib is,' she said.

"The Doctor um... picked up a copy in the city. He can't put it down.'

Gila's look was dark. 'It is a wicked book.'

'Yeah?'

"The slaver who took me from my homeland said he was involved in its creation. Though theAja'ib is thousands of years old - the work of many, wicked hands through the years - it has great power, that text.'

'Well,' Sam said lightly. "The Doctor always likes a good, racy read.' Then they came to a cramped clearing in which a table of green wrought iron had been laid with curious delicacies. There were slivers of soaked pink cake and a kind of sherry which was so old that, when Our Lady carefully poured some, it came out thick as liquid demerara sugar.

'Sit with me,' said Our Lady.'And tell me your story.'

Her voice was quite pleasant, welcoming, but Sam couldn't help staring at the perfect white of her face and hands as they worked. She thought that pale flesh had the whiteness of the grubs that fed under stones and rotten tree bark in the deepest, darkest recesses of the woods.

***

In the self-regarding, self-sufficient town of Fortalice, the travellers had found themselves hopelessly separated and under the influence of three distinct parties. The librarian, the Executioner and the nun. It was one of the many turning points in their journey. These disparate parties worked their influence upon the visitors, as they did upon all newcomers to that

town. Tune was an irrelevance here, a toy, a peculiar, limiting construct that elsewhere held its subjects bound.

None of the four, however, forgot their quest for a moment. At the back of their minds, as they sought seclusion from the violence that was climaxing on the streets as the sun went down, they were all still aware of this basic urgency: to get back on the bus, to reunite, to get away and seek out their quarry. Iris repeated, like a mantra, the names of the remaining captives she needed to make elsewhere on this world: the Bearded lady, the Cyborg Duchess, the Mock Turtle. Somewhere, somewhere in the spread, fathomless, opalescent vastness of Hyspero these figures waited for her. First there was the influence of the Executioner, the librarian and the nun to escape.

The Executioner lectured her monotonously in his deathly, sepulchral tones, on his art, his infinitely various and ingenious methods of killing people. Torture was his passion, his exquisite forte. There was little use for it in Fortalice, however - to torture visitors would prompt them to confess and to confess contraband knowledge, to spout their alien heresies and fictions, and that was precisely what the Executioner didn't want to hear. Torture was his private, exclusive vice, but he began always by slicing out the victims' tongues, to prevent unwanted babblings. No need for them to beg mercy, either, since he had none.

'Charming,' said Iris and listened, appalled as he went on to describe the apparatus on a platform in the town square which, at midnight, he would have her placed in and eviscerated for all to see. He described their forthcoming orgiastic glee at this sight,

Iris blanched.'It's like a giant egg slicer!'

And like an egg, or the goose that laid the golden egg, she would be split open spectacularly, and they would scoop out her golden hearts in public, as the clock bonged out the midnight chimes. Iris was twin-hearted - double-yolked - and how pleased they would be at this discovery.

As the Executioner chuntered on and on about his specialist skills and the spiritual benefits of this kind of ritual offering, this obscure, heartless propitiation, Iris raised her eyes to the windows to stare at the darkening sky and prayed that the Doctor, wherever he was, would come and rescue her once again.

Chapter Thirteen
Pulling Out Her Hearts

Nothing corresponded. He looked at chart after chart and nothing stayed the same. Whole mountain ranges, seas and deserts found themselves displaced, transplanted, pulled out of all shape like a bad piece of knitting in each successive map he examined. No two cartographers used the same methods, scales, signs and symbols. Nothing measured up. In each map Hyspero mutated into something quite different.

"The map-makers came from all over the world, all different eras,' said the now solicitous Gharib. Could the Doctor detect an undercurrent of irony in his tone? A surreptitious: See? It's hopeless. No one can know Hyspero with any degree of accuracy. Best to ignore it, deny it, know only what you can know. The Doctor thought that the apparent confounding changeability of the rest of the world was what made the Fortaliceans so short-sighted. He was glimpsing the root cause of their incuriosity. Him, it only enticed.

Each map-maker had read the world and constructed it in his or her own baffling and partisan fashion. Features were exaggerated or occluded. Some drew fabulously preposterous versions of the world that bore no resemblance to any other. Some maps were created by people who claimed to have travelled every inch of their breathtaking scope, and others boasted of never having left their armchairs.

The Doctor reduced the secret map room to a dreadful mess. It came to resemble his own, absent-mindedly chaotic work spaces aboard his TARDIS. Unscrolled and frangible texts were scattered on each available surface as he, with unseemly haste, took in all of their details with those avid, blue-green eyes.

He was reminded of those maps he had seen of the Earth, when Australia was still the great unknown. Its edges were nibbled cautiously, etched in fine, distorted detail, and its central, unexplored heart was left to fill a full quarter of the world's space. Ignorance let those blank. spaces aggrandise themselves - as on Gallifrey, where the timid, still superstitious Time Lords assumed that the abandoned Death Zone was a far greater expanse than it truly was. The Doctor had been there, he knew (as did, curiously, Iris) that the Death Zone was actually no larger than North Wales. Far from being clear and passionless renderings of facts, he knew that maps were expressions of fear, conquest, loathing,

greed, imagination and unbounded curiosity.

Kestheven, the great wooded region south of here, appeared several times over as, variously, Kssven, Kest, Cha'vin, Kaastn, and Keeisht. Over and over again it was embodied in drawings of monstrous bears and vicious-looking, bloody-beaked, predatory birds. The birds' beaks and the pelts of the bears were now and then painted in golden ink. South of here. It was the best information he could glean from these questionable sources. One or two maps, the more ancient he could uncover, sketched in routes from the foothills, through verdant valleys. He felt in his pockets for paper and a pencil. He found only the Aja'ib and set about sketching rough copies of the lines in the back flyleaf. Gharib was staggered. 'You have a book.'

The Doctor nodded, smiling. He'd forgotten how the Aja'ib might startle the keeper of the thousand and one Fortalicean volumes. 'And you are defacing it!'

'Nonsense,' said the Doctor, who was an inveterate underliner, a scribbler in margins, a very unpassive reader. Some of his oldest, most precious volumes in the TARDIS library were swamped by his commentaries from successive readings over the years. All of the Doctors had added their contributions - picking fights with the original author, then with each other as their various, hotly held opinions clashed and altered, To the Doctor his own books were the place his previous selves met in a busy, textual polyphony. All his books were dense palimpsests of gripes.

'What is that book?' asked Gharib, with unmistakable greed. The Doctor finished his rapid note-taking. 'You can't have it, I'm afraid. I've grown rather attached to this. It's a fat anthology - a kind of adventure story. Perfect for lonely desert nights. Listen to this.' He flipped at random and started to read to Gharib, about the race of men built of molten silver, whose innards ran with mercury, who emerged from deep beneath the world's icy crust.

Instinctively the librarian covered his ears.'But where are the caveats? Where does the book deny these things their existence? Where are the footnotes to disprove these outrageous assertions?'

'There aren't any,' said the Doctor. 'These things are just said and left at that. Let me find the bit about the vast white bird who roosts at the beginning of time...' He started to flick pages.

'You cannot be allowed to have this.' Nimbly the librarian snatched the Aja'ib from his fingers.

'Ah,' said the Doctor, and snatched it back. 'I hate lending out books. They never come back.'

'It's a dangerous book in the wrong hands,' said Gharib.

'Mine are the right hands,' countered the Doctor in a conciliatory tone.

'I can't let you out of this building, taking a book of heresies out into the streets of Fortalice.'

'The Fortaliceans are rather more interested in beating each other up at the moment.'

The flustered librarian was putting away the maps, ramming them back any old how into drawers.'I should never have brought you here,' he said.

'I'll just be going, then,' said the Doctor.'You'll never know I'd been.'

'I can't,' gabbled Gharib.'I can't let you go if you don't leave that book behind.'

'I'm afraid I don't want to do that.'

'Then I'm sorry, Doctor,' said Gharib and, immediately, the room filled with a noxious green cloud. It came issuing, sinisterly, from the gaps between sheaves of paper on the shelves. Its effect was instantaneous. As the Doctor fell to his knees, then toppled head first on to the flagstones, he was berating himself: what was the point of a respiratory bypass system if you didn't give yourself time to use it? Then he passed out, next to Gharib, who had succeeded in gassing himself as well.

***

Torches had been lit, as had a number of pyres around the town square, and on to these were tipped the bodies of those killed in the afternoon's festivities. The sky was darkened further and impenetrably by the stinking smoke that plunged upward from the flames. A new, subdued mood took the battered, bleeding populace. They were too stunned to

fight any more and they shambled into the dark to stand before the rough stage that had been set ready in front of the Executioner's house. Under red and black cloths his apparatus lay waiting for the final ceremonials, and it was these that the townsfolk came to see.

The storm had not yet come. Clouds that were not all smoke gathered above the town, amassing themselves ponderously, as if waiting for some signal.

'Why do they fight each other?' Iris asked the Executioner. "What makes them do it?'

He shrugged as if he hadn't a care in the world. 'A simple trick. They have built up a year of neighbourly resentments. We need this fracas to get these out into the open. It would be a much less peaceful place without this chance to vent the collective spleen.'

Iris and the Executioner were in a small cell behind the platform, waiting like actors to emerge. She could see the crowd through the slatted wood, feel the heat of their flames, smell the blood and booze on them. Curiously, she didn't feel scared. She was thinking about Mary, Queen of Scots, being led out to her death.And it wasn't the actual Mary she thought of, whom she'd seen at the time, looking rather wild and white; in Iris's memory Mary looked like Katherine Hepburn in the black-and-white film of the same name. Iris sighed. It was one of the hazards of her kind of travelling and seeing too many films; she was apt to mix up what she had seen, experienced, or even read. At any rate, she struggled to muster a queenly dignity and yet she couldn't seriously believe that this would be the end. She had faced this kind of hullabaloo before and survived it. Something or someone always turned up in the nick of time to save her. It wasn't in her nature to die in a stunted backwater like this. Still... whatever form the distraction or rescue was going to take, it was certainly taking its time about it.

'It's almost time,' said the Executioner. They were in the wings, waiting for the audience to settle, to stop chatting and rattling sweet wrappers.'You ought to make your peace with whatever heretical deity you serve.'

Iris snorted in derision. Then she asked, 'You said you get the Fortaliceans to vent their spleen by means of a simple trick. What did you mean?'

'You expect me to disclose my means of crowd control?'

She nodded.'Oh yes.'

'It is with this.' He had a small device clipped to his belt buckle. It looked rather like a TV remote control. This didn't help Iris, who could never tell one remote from another. She liked the hands-on approach.

'What does it do?'

'It magnifies antagonisms. It enlarges upon the prevailing mood. It makes everyone in the vicinity temporarily mad. They see things that aren't there.'

'A very handy little object, then,' she said appraisingly.

He smiled at her grimly and she thought, If only he didn't try to act so tough and wear such horrible retro S-and-M gear, he wouldn't be too bad-looking. He said to her.'Don't even think it.'With that, he unclipped the device and placed it safely among a whole lot of grisly, unsavoury implements of torture that didn't even look like they'd been washed. 'Come on. Let's get you out there.You've got a public to face.'

Iris let herself be shoved out through a hatchway on to the platform. A cry went up from the crowd as she was glimpsed, shambling into view. "This is all very interesting from an anthropological point of view," she was saying. 'Have you ever read the work of the French cultural historian Michel Foucault?'

The Executioner was checking ropes, hinges and springs. The cowled apparatus beside them looked distinctly unwelcoming.'No,' he snapped, reverting to his surly, public persona.

'Pity,' said Iris.'I think you'd enjoy what he has to say.'

***

'Hello,' he said as he woke.'I'm the Doctor.'

He had a new captor, staring down at him.

The Doctor was used to this business of tumbling from one set of hands into another, this frying-pan-and-fire existence of his. When he woke and

found himself strapped to a chair, the librarian Gharib similarly bound beside him, and the two of them on a balcony high atop the library building, he hardly turned a hair. The Doctor knew the advantages to be had from not letting his enemies see him knocked off his stroke.

And his enemy? Well, he wasn't sure what the fellow's intentions were yet. Give him the benefit of the doubt. However, the man confronting Gharib and the Doctor and watching them as they woke didn't look all that promising. He stood well over two meters tall, in flowing, high-collared robes, a turban wound ceremoniously on his head, the whole ensemble set off with brooches and scarabs. He had a fine, twirling moustache that the Doctor rather admired. He was also entirely transparent, glistening silver in the moonlight. When he moved there came a strangely calming chiming sound, like something carefully smoothing the lip of a glass. Their captor and his robes indeed appeared to be constructed of solid glass, and when he moved the light struck through him in a bewildering array of refractions and distortions.

'And can I ask who you are?' said the Doctor brightly.

When the man spoke his voice seemed to be coming up from the bottom of a well. The Doctor was intrigued - he had never met anyone made entirely of glass. He had once heard of a race of cats, glass all apart from their hearts, which could be seen quite plainly through their bodies, but for him, this was indeed a first.

The man said,'I am the Vizier.'

'The only one?'scoffed the Doctor.'I imagined that Hyspero would be overrun with Viziers. Why are you the definitive article?'

The Vizier curled a transparent lip. 'And you, then, are the only doctor?'

The Doctor smiled. Point taken.'I certainly hope so. Can I ask why you have bound us?'

Beside him Gharib was shaking in his quite elegant black shoes. "The Vizier only comes to check up on the very worst heresies.'

'We've had none of those round here,'said the Doctor glibly,'but if we hear of any, you'll be the first to -'

The Vizier sneered and produced the Aja'ib , which, presumably, he had

taken from the Doctor's grasp while he had been unconscious.'You can't be allowed to run around with things like this, you know.'

'I don't believe in banning books. It's a vile business.'

'There are some things it is dangerous for the people to know.'

'I don't agree with you.'

"Then you come from a very permissive society.'

'I come from no society. No establishment will have me.'

'I can see why.' The Vizier gave him and his dusty clothes a scathing glance. 'You are one of those hateful, self-appointed libertines who go running around and interfering.'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'Lord Vizier,' stammered Gharib. 'What will become of me?'

'Oh, be quiet,' said the glass Vizier, leaning forward to touch the librarian's knee. There was a rustling noise, as of debris clattering down a rock face, and Gharib, looking stricken, turned suddenly to stone. He was a pale limestone colour, only slightly less healthy than his usual shade.

'Unnecessary!' said the Doctor angrily.

'He is a silly pedant,' purred the Vizier. 'He was giving me a headache.'

'I can see right through your head. There's nothing inside it, let alone an ache.'

'I was cursed,' snarled the Vizier.'By my former mistress.'

'Don't tell me: the Scarlet Empress.'

'That vile harpy. I couldn't bring back the thief that had stolen her most prized possession, not by using any of my enchantments. And so she turned me out of the palace, out of the city, and trapped me here. In the backward society you see before you.' He wafted a glassy hand to indicate the scene in the square below, of which the Doctor hadn't been

taking sufficient notice. He hadn't seen who was being brought before the torch-waving rabble.

'She turned you into glass.'

'And so I cannot leave this building,' the Vizier spat.'I am too precious.'

'And too fragile.'

'Not as fragile as you may think.'

'Tell me,' said the Doctor thoughtfully, his fingers busy all this while with tackling the knots that held him bound. 'What was the prize possession that you failed to return to the Scarlet Empress?'

The Vizier's eyes glittered red - the only two spots of natural colour in him.'You seriously expect me to tell you that?'

'It was worth a try.'

'It was something stolen ten years ago, by an evil pack of brigands and renegades. The Empress would do anything, give anything, employ anyone to get it back.'

The Doctor looked thoughtful again. 'I know.'

***

When he sat her and secured her inside his wicked-looking contraption, the Executioner explained that there were microphones all about her head. Everyone would hear each of her wails and screams; even her tiniest of gurgles would resound. He hoped she would put on a good show and go like a banshee.

Iris looked grim. 'You're really going to do this, aren't you?' She eyed the arms and legs of the device, as they hummed into life. Their pincers and blades began to flex.

'Of course,' said the Executioner with a tight smile. The loudspeakers crackled and she heard his next words booming around the town square. Instantly the crowd stopped to listen attentively. 'You are a visitor, a demon, and the only purpose of your existence is to -'

'Spare me the rhetoric,' she barked and was pleased at the way her voice carried out over the heads of the throng.'But I've got friends out there, somewhere. Other visitors...'

'Have you?' asked the Executioner eagerly. 'And they'll stop you from doing this...'

'I doubt it.'

One of the mechanical arms made an experimental slash in the air, drawing closer to her.

'Wait!'cried Iris.

***

The Vizier had opened theAja'ib like a prayer book, and was chanting over it. 'Go on,' said the Doctor, goading him. 'Show me what it can do.'

The Vizier's glass body was suffused with pink, as if in effort. The pages of the book began to smoke and the first thing the Doctor thought was that he was destroying it. Then he noticed that the pages were swarming with tiny, animated figures. Like holograms they shifted and crackled, drawing him in and becoming clearer all the time. The pages unfolded like a three-dimensional map and the more he stared, the more vividly he could see what was emerging from the text's vellum: the metal automata he had read about in those very paragraphs, exactly as he had imagined them, gliding through tendrils of smoke, slicing the air with bolts of lethal radiation. The Vizier chuckled, staring down at what he had conjured in his hands. The Doctor licked his dry lips.

'Very impressive,' he conceded. To himself he repeated the spell the Vizier had murmured. It seemed a simple enough formula. 'But aren't they very small? I thought, when you said a full manifestation...' He shrugged, as if disappointed.

'I can manage a full manifestation...' growled the Vizier.

At this point the voices of the Executioner and another voice - one he recognised - came blaring out of the night. For the first time the Doctor peered over the balcony and realised at a glance what was going on. 'Oh, Iris,' he moaned. 'How do you always get yourself into these things?'

'Ah,'said the Vizier. "They're about to cut out her heart.'

'Hearts,' corrected the Doctor absently. 'Here, let me have a go.'

The Vizier gave him a mocking sneer, but rested the book on his lap.

The Doctor concentrated on the page where the book had opened. The previous image had cleared. He started to intone the words he had heard the Vizier say. Iris and the Executioner continued to squabble in full view of the crowd and he tried to block out of his mind the first affronted shrieks as the Executioner's apparatus set to tentative, teasing work.

'How dare you think you might match my skill?' jeered the Vizier.

The Doctor came to the end of the spell and found that he had meanwhile untied himself. He seized hold of the Aja'ib with both hands and jumped to his feet, just as the book started to smoke and rattle hard against his fingers. As if, he thought suddenly, something very large was trying to get out.

'You can't...'gasped the glass Vizier.

Yet he could.

The Doctor stood at the balcony and, as if summoned from some mysterious pocket dimension of which theAja'ib was the threshold, a distinct, incandescent form was taking shape in the air.

The crowd below had started to notice something going on above their heads.

Two vast purple wings sprouted out of the smoke. Scaled bats' wings, taloned and scarred, wildly beating. There were screams. Then a body emerged, as wide as the double-decker bus. Three shrieking heads thrashed at the end of three serpentine necks and multiple cries filled the stormy air with weird quaverings and glissandi. The creature bounded and descended, baying hungrily with three mouths, upon the crowd. The crowd instantly lost all interest in the ritual torture of Iris Wildthyme.

'A hydra,' the Doctor gasped in wonder.'I've conjured up a hydra!' He slammed the book, but the creature was free, capering horribly above

the people, who were scattering now. Its cries drowned out theirs.

'What have you called up?' the Vizier said hollowly, drained of colour once more.

'I told you,' said the Doctor, appalled at himself.'It's a hydra.' Then, turning, he took one last regretful look at the frozen, stony Gharib, and fled the balcony. He knew the Vizier was too fragile to give chase, but his haunting, glassy voice called out in rage,'Bring back theAja'ib

The Doctor took the spiralling steps to the ground floor three at a time.

Chapter Fourteen
Hating Monsters

The storm chose this moment to break, and unleash a great, dark torrent upon Fortalice.Rain crashed on to the shabby rooftops and cascaded in the streets, creating instant floods which, gathering force and speed, seemed to be sluicing the townspeople away as they fled the square and the creature that was wreaking havoc there.

Wreaking havoc, the Doctor found himself thinking as he ran into the street. An odd phrase, really, and although it was the effect he often had, he had never wondered where it came from.

The lightning cracked open the dense sky and was followed by the inevitable, bronchial mutter of thunder. The square was almost cleared of people: they were as terrified of the electrical storm as they were of the hydra, which was, with the whole town to choose from, contenting itself with attacking the Executioner's gilded palace. Its shrieking mouths, the Doctor noted, belched acrid flames. He peered through the murk and panic, the slashing rain and smoke, and saw a clear route to the platform.

Shackled, Iris could only watch and swear as the machinery that held her continued to buzz, whirr and saw through the air. The blades glinted and ran with rainwater and scythed ever closer.

The Executioner threw back his cowled head and bellowed out his frustration - at the vanishing crowds, the storm's onslaught, and the inexplicable beast above. The beast was wrecking his resplendent home.

Iris writhed against her bindings and then she saw, coming at a run across the square, a familiar figure in a green velvet coat, his cravat flying loose behind him, and his drenched hair plastered down his face.

'Get me out of this thing!' she howled. As if in response a blade slashed into her chubby arm, flensing neatly through her cardigan. She screamed.

'I'm coming!' called the Doctor, hopping nimbly over fallen bodies and dodging the last curious few.

This exchange alerted the Executioner. His head whipped around and he poured a stream of foul invective at the Doctor.

'You set this... thing on to my execution!'

The Doctor vaulted on to the wooden platform and laughed madly. Even his was taken aback by his obvious pleasure.'Haven't you heard? Monsters dog me wherever I go!'

There was a crack then, a rending of stone and metal as the turret that the hydra was attacking toppled free and crashed on to the cobbles of the square.

'Make it stop!'squealed the Executioner.

'I can't!' laughed the Doctor. 'It isn't even real. How can I?' Then he slid, blithe and Houdini-like, into the apparatus that held Iris, struggling with the primitive bolts and knots.'Have you out in a jiffy,' he hissed, and ducked suddenly, avoiding the blades that whizzed, that instant, towards his face.'Hang on!'

Iris was beside herself.

***

The rabble this year,' said Our Lady,'seems even rowdier.'

Gila glowered at her from across the iron table. He was tired of listening to her, drinking her ancient syrupy sherry and nursing his aches and bruises. For some time now the robed stranger had been telling her visitors the story of how she came down from the mountains and made her life in this dank, vegetative gloom. Sam looked as eager to be gone as Gila did, but she kept prompting the hag to go on, as if she might learn something useful. Gila fancied getting back outside and having another pop at those peasants. They wouldn't take him by surprise this time.

Our Lady's children, black-eyed, docile, reverential, drew around them to listen to the woman talk. She, thought Gila, liked the sound of her own voice too much.

'They won't attack the temple,' said the nun.'Don't worry, Gila.You're quite safe here.'

Gila scowled at her.

'Poor Gila,' Sam smiled.'His nerves are shot.' She took advantage of the pause in Our Lady's story. 'Really, we ought to be getting back to our friends.'

The nun's patient smile froze.'No one can leave the temple until this dreadful day is over. That is tradition. Can't you hear? The tempest has begun.'

They listened to the rain, which could still be heard this deep inside the building as it lashed against stone and stained glass.

'A little bit of rain won't hurt us.'

'Nevertheless,' said Our Lady, 'you will stay. At least until morning. I wouldn't dream of sending you out there.' She sounded absurdly like an overly concerned hostess. 'But I have talked too long. You must rest.' With that she stood and motioned the nearest of the children to clear away their dirty plates and glasses. The other children melted into the undergrowth. They could hear them sniggering, rustling, even after they were gone.

'I hope you will be comfortable sleeping on the ground here,' said Our Lady sadly. "The lichen is quite soft, though somewhat damp. Pretend you are sleeping in a safe forest glade.' Then she was gone, slipping into the darkness, and Sam and Gila were alone again.

'I don't know about you,' said Sam,'but I'm not sleeping down here.'

'What do you want to do?'

'We're going to find a way out.' She had drunk too much of that sweet, crystallised wine. The fumes knocked inside her head and all of a sudden she found that the sweet, fecund scent of all that vegetation bothered her.'We have to get back on the bus.'

'I thought you'd do as Our Lady told you,' said Gila. 'You toadied around her enough.'

'What?'

'Asking her questions. Keeping her rambling on. Who does she think she is?'

'It doesn't hurt to be polite.' God, I sound like my mother, she thought.

'Yes it does.'

'Are you coming or not?'

'You reckon she'll just let us wander out of here?' Sam led the way through the trees. She gazed apprehensively into the overgrown chapel. It seemed that the oozing plant life had proliferated even as they talked. Fresh, tender shoots had crept across the pathway she was sure they had taken before.'I think we can get out, yes,' she said, stumbling on a pile of fallen stones. The ground was perilous with ruined masonry and brown leaf mulch. 'I think,' said Gila, following,'that she intends to keep us here.'

'Oh,' said Sam wearily.'Why? Why do you always think the worst?'

'Have we come across anyone on this trip yet who's meant us well?' Sam thought.'Not really.'

'We're travelling under a cloud, Sam. We're bringing the curse of the Scarlet Empress with us.'

'Don't be so melodramatic. Curse of the Scarlet Empress. Sounds like a B movie.'

'A what?'

'Oh.' She stopped. Right in the path she could have sworn should lead outside, there stood the trunk of a gnarled tree, wider than she could stretch her arms.'We've lost our way.'

***

Iris was freed like a magician's assistant who steps from the glossy, lacquered cabinet all in one miraculous piece.

'It's just like old times, Doctor,' she said ruefully. 'Remember Venice and those awful fish people, and Wilde and -'

'Oh, come on,' he said irritably, glancing around before he jumped off the platform. The whole ensemble shuddered with the thunder.'You're lucky you weren't struck by lightning, sitting in that...' He struggled for a word.

'Egg-slicer thing,' she supplied, and heaved herself off the stage. She glanced up at the hydra, which was still attacking the palace, sending rubble crumbling to the wet ground.'How on earth did you summon up that thing?'

He started to run for the bus.'Would you believe black magic?'

'No,' she panted, struggling through the black, bloody mud.

'Neither would I,' he said, and stopped. 'Ah.'

Behind them the Executioner had reappeared, this time wielding the remote-control device from his belt. He had nipped back to fetch it and now he was powering the thing up with a furious expression. The air between Iris, the Doctor and the waiting bus was shimmering and warping as something else started to take form.

Iris said, "That's his machine for deluding people.'

The Doctor stared.'I thought it must be.'

Before them, standing taller than the roofs around them, coalesced the stout and snarling figure of a gryphon. Its lion's body was coiled to pounce, its eagle's head clashed a voracious beak.

'It's an illusion,' said the Doctor hopefully.

'I don't think so,' said his.

To check, the Doctor went running towards it.

The gryphon beat its vast, all-too-corporeal wings twice and reached out one golden paw.

Too late, the Doctor skidded to a halt. He brushed the hair from his eyes with both hands. 'It's real!' Then he was snatched up and lifted high into the stormy air.

'Doctor!' bawled Iris.

Behind her the Executioner cackled and made some final adjustments.

The Doctor came eye to eye with the gryphon. The claws dug into his sides.'Are you real?' he asked aloud, staring into eyes as wide and round as cartwheels.

Iris swore again. Her turn to rescue him, this time.

While the gryphon was preoccupied, she scurried off towards the bus, grimacing at the pain in her arms. She kept her nerve and shot under the creature's legs, gagging at its musty stench.

The bus. There it was, untouched, waiting for her as ever.You're either on the bus or off the bus, she'd told her last companion when he left. The passengers on her bus had to be loyal to each other.When they got into tight corners, they did everything they could for each other. As she felt inside her many pockets for the key, she stole a glance back at the square and her eyes widened. This was the tightest corner she had been in for a while.

The hydraulic doors swished open and all the lights popped on. She needed to think fast.

Outside, the hydra had at last lost interest in demolishing the palace. It wheeled around in the air, blasting flames and fumes to orientate itself. All three heads fixed their burning gazes on the gryphon and saw in it a suitable rival. The hydra plunged down headlong into the square, stretching its wings to their fullest.

The Executioner was shrill with delight. He cackled merrily at the Doctor's plight. He was laughing when the hydra's breath touched him and, in one crackling discharge, burnt him to a crisp.

This caught the gryphon's attention.

The Doctor cursed and cried out as he was squeezed even tighter. He craned his neck to see the hydra shuffling, advancing across the ground on clawed, elephantine legs.

'Why don't you just put me down first?' he yelled.'And then you boys can get on with it?' But the gryphon had forgotten all about the tiny being in

its grasp. With its free paw it clawed the ground, as if about to charge.

'I hate monsters,' the Doctor yelled.'Why is it always me?'

Then the hydra lunged. Its three heads struck at once, attacking from all angles. The confused gryphon reared and felt one of those fanged heads bite into its pelt, bringing up a furious welter of blood. It dropped the Doctor to the ground and grasped the middle neck of the lizard and held on for all it was worth. The Doctor crash-landed in mud, in a clatter of confused, scrabbling limbs, the wind knocked out of him.

'Doctor!'

He looked up to see the bus, all its lights blazing, dwarfed in the shadow of the behemoths.

'Get yourself away from them!'

Iris was hastily assembling what looked for all the world like a First World War bazooka on a tripod, a little distance from her ship. She looked manic, forcing in the gunpowder, her hair standing wildly on end. Then she slipped the mortar in and went scuttling round the back.

'Get down!' she screamed.

He pelted for cover.

A huge, over-optimistic blast rent the air.

The tussling creatures were hit full blast. For an instant they were lit up orange and black. There was a shower of filth and blood and hanks of fresh meat.

'Run!' shouted Iris and, through the dense smoke, the Doctor, skidding, sliding, deafened, ran.

She caught him. 'Here! I've got you.' She grasped his arms and with surprising force hustled him aboard the bus.

As the doors clashed shut he was lying breathless in the gangway. Iris threw herself into the driver's seat and revved the engine. 'We're off!' she said, and the bus rolled with unseemly haste out of the town square.

The Doctor dragged himself to his feet to see the gryphon and the hydra, both hideously injured, blackened and hanging together by threads, still raking and pulling at each other.

Then the bus turned a corner and went splashing through the dark, deserted streets of Hyspero.

The Doctor passed out.

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Iris drove like a mad thing, determined to leave the whole place far behind. She kept her sensible shoe down hard on the accelerator and got them both out of Fortalice. Above, the storm was reaching its terrible height.

Chapter Fifteen
Hands of the Duchess

They could have been Babes in the Wood, fallen asleep under a mantle of leaves, except that one of them was covered in scales and the other one wore a Blur T-shirt. They might have been the spellbound lovers of A Midsummer Night's Dream , apart from the fact that they got on each other's nerves all the time. And this wood was indoors, rank and dripping and filled with unearthly, almost sentient plant life.

Before Sam and Gila gave up on finding a way out tonight, the alligator man said wearily, 'You know, I think this place is bigger on the inside than out.' This and Sam's laughter was their last exchange before they both fell asleep, quite apart, on the driest grass they could find.

Sam was drawn into her most vivid dream for months. Something in the fecund, fetid atmosphere of the temple jungle seemed to work on her imagination. She was back in the equally baffling yet homely, cathedral-like inner space of the Doctor's TARDIS. She longed to be there, and conjured up all its familiar Victoriana, its ludicrous Jules Vernisms, the ranks of various clock faces, the potted palms, the rich carpets and dubious antiques. Even the bats squealing in the tallest recesses of the almost invisible ceiling. The lambent blue of the time rotor was a baleful, but reassuring glow. She thought of the Ship as home. In her mind she could wander around, from the library, to the door behind through which there was a whole grassy hillside, swarming with millions of butterflies. In her dream she was looking for the Doctor, unpanicked as yet, because he often vanished deep inside the Ship and was never seen for days. On those days she suspected he was off having adventures of his own, and neglecting to tell her. That was what she used to think in the early days especially, when her younger self (she now felt) clung to him in a way she would never do now. She had learned to let him go his own way somewhat. Possessive with the Doctor was one thing you could never be.

Then, she saw that the vast console room was full of life. The scaled, silvery forms of slumbering Skarasen lay everywhere on the bare stone, on the Persian carpets, even on the Volkswagen Beetle parked in one recess. The Skarasen - almost two hundred of them - breathed in slumberous, fluting whispers, oddly peaceful now they were aboard the Ship and she and the Doctor were taking them away from Earth, where they had been used as murderous tools by their Zygon masters, to a

planet where they could frolic harmlessly. She stared out at the silvered, dinosaur-like creatures and their many rows of deadly fangs and marvelled at her own calm. Then she was aware of the Doctor at her side, working busily at the controls, tapping in his commands with his usual air of deliberation and pot luck. This had all been some time ago. Years, in fact, for Sam.

The Doctor looked up at her and grinned. 'You look as if you're in a trance.'

She smiled at him weakly. 'Maybe I am.' This was all very lucid, for a dream. Usually her dreams slipped about chaotically, as her sleeping mind attempted to come to rapid terms with her confusing waking life. This was almost as if she had slipped back in time to this moment several years ago, when they had just left Victorian London, with a lethal, sleeping freight of sea monsters aboard, and the Doctor was still patting his own back for doing a fine job as Pied Piper.

Pied Piper, she thought. That's what he is for all of us. Iris included.

There was that tell-tale tingle in her fingers that meant she'd travelled in time. She always got that. And a slight nausea, in the first moments. She asked him,'Are you still on Hyspero, Doctor?'

He looked at her blankly.'Hyspero? I haven't been there in years. How do you know about Hyspero?'

'I don't know,' she said slowly.'I think that's where I am.'

'Ah.' He looked concerned, thoughtful. He peered into her eyes. 'You're in some kind of telepathic trance. Perhaps your future self trying to contact me through your current self.'

Her eyes widened. 'Can I do that?' And Sam grinned to herself, to hear herself so young-sounding and trusting. All that will change, she thought grimly.

Perhaps the Doctor is right, then, and I really am sending myself back to contact him. She made herself say, 'You've gone missing, Doctor. We've been split up in the town of Fortalice. Gila and I can't leave the temple.You and Iris are -'

The Doctor shook his head crossly.'You're making no sense.' His face

seemed to darken. 'Stop babbling at me. I've work to do.' He turned abruptly to the console and pored over its wooden, blinking panels. 'Besides, I haven't seen Iris Wildthyme in decades.' He whirled around, realising. 'You really are telepathically linked, aren't you?'

'I don't know,' said Sam with a shrug.

The snores all around them went up in pitch for a moment and one of the nearest glistening beasts rolled over, its paws oddly vulnerable-looking as it slept.

'Let me see...' mumbled the Doctor. 'We need to put our heads together...'And he gave an uncharacteristic giggle. Then he bounded over the brass rail that ran around the console and hurried across the floor, clambering where necessary over the creatures' supine forms. Sam followed and the short trip seemed to take hours.

By the library there was a door she had never noticed before. 'Open sesame,' grinned the Doctor and it sprang open. It was dark within and she didn't want to go in. Suddenly she didn't trust him.'Think of it,' he said.'as the Citizens'Advice Bureau.We're going to get some advice.'And he ushered her into a dimly lit, cavernous room.

She was in a circle lit by. guttering candle flames described by thirteen stakes, struck into the brick floor like a clock face. On seven of the pointed stakes were jammed seven gorily severed heads. Almost all of them were older than the Doctor she was used to. Their eyes were dead, the faces lustreless and chilled blue. The Doctor examined them with a certain amount of pride.

'Hello, everyone. Sam here has a question.'

She wanted to get out of there.

He went on,'She wants to know if it's possible to consult and ask for help from your former selves. Speak up, Sam. Tell the nice Doctors.'

All seven heads started talking at once.

'Really, Doctor, this is hardly -' ,..

'You see, my dear, it's very simple...'

'I'm not exactly breaking the Laws of Time but -

'There were once three sisters, and they lived at the bottom of a treacle well...'

'Only in the direst of emergencies can you -'

'Nice? Nice?'

'I saw this coming.'

Their separate voices fought for her attention. They grew louder and louder, into a cacophonous din. The Doctor beside her was laughing as she covered up her ears. He said,'I'm even giving myself a headache!'

Sam jammed her eyes shut until the collective voices stopped.

And she was in silence.

Silence except for the moist crepitation, the insidious rustling of the lush forest. And something else: a delicate chinking noise, as of the most intricate, well-oiled clockwork.

She was back on the forest floor. Her heart refused to slow down. She really hoped that had been a dream.

When she rolled and turned and brushed off her face and body the wet, leathery leaves that had dropped on to her while she slept, she saw Gila apparently in deep conversation with somebody she couldn't make out. She kept still and peered into the murky distance between them.

Gila sat on his haunches and he was sitting still, in silent communion with what looked for all the world like a pale silver bird. From this came a tinny, mechanical sound, as the wings beat and it hovered. Then Sam saw that it wasn't a bird at all, but two electronic hands joined at the thumbs in mid-air. These disembodied prostheses hovered effortlessly in the dark and stared back at Gila. Stared back, she noted, via the ten electronic eyeballs that had been appended to each silver digit. The hand-wings flapped and the ten eyes glared at Gila, and now Sam.

Gila saw that she was awake.

'Don't frighten it,' he told Sam.

She kept still.'What... who is it?'

'It is part of one of those we are looking for,' he breathed. 'She knows we are coming. These are the hands of the Duchess.'

To Sam they looked as if they were beckoning them ever on in their quest. But the inscrutable hands could just as easily be warning them, and holding them off.

***

All through the night she kept her foot on the pedal. At last they had left Fortalice far behind and the rain lashed down as they cleared the foothills. Iris drove grimly, hunched over the wheel, allowing herself to calm down gradually, letting her hearts beat at their accustomed rate. She was trying to fight that ever-present nausea, the blackness at the edges of her vision that were threatening to overwhelm her. The Doctor had heaved himself on to a settee and fallen into a deep sleep.

The roads here were rough and looked as if they had been unused for centuries. It took a fair amount of concentration to keep the bus safely intact as they bounced and crashed through the remains of the storm.

She drove all night and, at the end of it, when day poked cautiously into view, the storm had spent itself and she found that they were in a valley. It was perilous and rocky and filled with straggly vegetation. Everything was pale in the morning light, his hated pale colours. She pulled the bus to a halt and for the first time felt relieved that they had managed to get out of town alive. They had travelled over a hundred miles.

Mercifully, the Doctor was still sleeping. When he woke she knew what he would say. She had left their companions behind. She hadn't even thought of them until the later stages of this drive. Would he insist on going back for them? Surely even he wouldn't insist on foolhardiness like that.

She opened the doors, stepping out into the cool dawn. It was eerily silent. Far away, birds cried. She sat on a rock overlooking the valley and lit herself a glorious cigarette. She would have to shower, change, make herself up again. Her travels seemed to her to be a constant round of hasty repatchings of her worn old self. She hated to be seen at anything less than her very best, and at the moment she felt a filthy,

dishevelled mess.

Her breath rattled inside her. If she was honest, she felt ghastly. It was time to get this show on the road. There was work to be done.

Iris stubbed out her cigarette and hurried back to the bus. On the way upstairs she peeked at the Doctor and, for the first time, allowed herself to think, I have him all to myself. Usually there were distractions, companions, other dangers that got in the way. This was the first time they had been alone together in years. The old feelings were still there. She loved him, whatever shape he was in. He slept restlessly, arms flung out, tousled, rumpled in his green coat. He muttered. In their present, respective bodies he looked young enough to be her nephew. She chuckled. He was going to be furious with her when he woke, she was sure. Yet this current Doctor was gentler, conciliatory, much more human, in many ways, than the Doctors of old. She was surprised how chatty and frank, how touchy-feely he had become, as if making up for years and years of standoffishness. And yet he was also rather quick to anger. She had witnessed some formidable outbursts, tantrums almost, during their few short days together. This Doctor was more rooted in the everyday, and prone to the emotional wrangles of those about him. It made him much more approachable, and Ms - easy prey as ever to her emotions - could only approve.

She'd make herself up and look all glamorous, ready for his waking.

Then she'd be ready for those inevitable reproaches. She would mollify him somehow.

***

It was morning outside in ruinous Fortalice. The streets were churned with masonry and mud and, in the town square, among the wreckage of torture equipment and bonfires, lay the still, half-devoured carcasses of the hydra and the gryphon which had both, predictably, battled through the night, to the death. The shell-shocked Fortaliceans emerged, wide-eyed, to see what had become of their town. It was all outside of their usual experience. Their straitened circumstances, education and imaginations had no way of taking it all in. Their Executioner, however, was dead. Their librarian was turned to stone. They would have to find their own way out of this particular ontological and epistemological rubble. For now, though, they stared. And they stared at the only building that had remained untouched throughout the disastrous night -

the temple of Our Lady.

Within the temple it was dark still. The light would take a number of hours to penetrate the jungle gloom.

Sam and Gila were walking, creeping, through the trees and tethered, barbed vines. They were following the progress of the silver hands, which, now equipped with eyeballs, seemed to know exactly where they were going. The hands of the Duchess floated on the rich, humid air and Sam and GUa had no choice but to follow.

It should have been impossible, but the loamy ground seemed to be even more overgrown; it appeared to be declining and they were stumbling downhill. All signs that they were inside a temple had disappeared during their hours of stealing after the winging hands.

'And we haven't been stopped by that old witch, either,' said Gila, with as much glee as he could muster. "We've done it, Sam! The Duchess is leading us to safety!'

Sam frowned. 'Don't talk too soon.' She knew that it was just at the point when you were feeling all smug and confident of your own success that fate always intervened and pushed you on your arse.

'Have faith, Sam,' said Gila.

'That's what the Doctor says.'

At length the hands brought them to a stone wall. The jungle ended abruptly. It was a dead end. The metal fingers rapped impatiently at the pitted surface.

'We're still inside the temple, after all,' said Sam.

'Of course we are.' Gila squatted, looking depressed. 'We've been going round in circles.'

The fingers of the Duchess got to work then, decisively. They split up and went their separate ways, drawing a careful, perfectly symmetrical portal on the brick wall. This outline glowed with a pearly light and Sam stared at it as the solid wall within the lines crumbling and dissolved like an aspirin, revealing blackness beyond.

'A passageway!' laughed Gila, jumping up.'Duchess, I love you.'

The hands came together and spread open, as if awaiting applause. Then they shot into the dark, leading the way once more.

When Sam and Gila stepped through the portal the hands were gone.

They were at the top of a stone staircase that seemed to lead down into a cavern, which rang hollowly with the sound of dripping water.

'Slimy stone steps,' Sam grunted, leading the way. 'Just what we need to break our necks. Why is it no one on other planets has carpets?' In the dark she paused and rummaged through her leopard-skin bag for a torch.

The portal behind and above them clashed back down. Gila gave a sibilant curse and they were in complete, Stygian gloom until Sam found and switched on her torch.'It's a fake light sabre,' she smiled.'Like in Star Wars. Isn't it fantastic?' The fluorescent beam had extended into a brilliant blue shaft and illuminated the cavern with crazy, wayward shadows. It wasn't in the least bit comforting. She led them down the steps into a wide, damp-floored tunnel.

'IsStar Wars another of your offworld references?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I wish you would stop that.'

'It's my culture. I can't help it.'

Gila muttered. 'Save your breath for walking. I think we've got quite a distance to go.'

'Right.' She was starving as they set off, she realised.'We had it so easy on the bus, didn't we? The Doctor cooking up lunch, brewing tea. Iris laying on wonderful dinners every night. Veggie fare, too. Why can't all journeys be like that?'

'Because they can't,' snapped Gila bad-naturedly.'And I would rather depend upon my own resources than Iris. I've had enough of that flaky old sow.'

'Get you!' Sam laughed. 'You should lighten up, Gila!' She waved the torch beam in his face. He looked at her venomously and snatched the light-sabre toy.

'I'll lead the way,' he growled.

***

They walked and Sam tried not to irritate him too much by talking. He was so touchy. She just kept thinking of things to say.

'When I was in the temple of Our Lady, I had this dream...'

'I had dreams there, too,' said Gila. His voice sounded troubled to her. 'Dreams of the swamps again, and of the dark man, the slaver. It was something in scents and the pollen, working on our brains, insinuating themselves into our cells.'

'I dreamed I was warning the Doctor,' said Sam,'and telling him where we were. I saw the Skarasen - these two hundred slumbering dragons we were taking to an outer world. And at the time the Doctor said how pleased he was to do that, because once he had seen a Skarasen alone, an exile from its natural habitat.'

'So he transported two hundred dragons?' said Gila incredulously.

Sam nodded. 'He was giving them another chance. In their natural habitat. It was only on Earth, in the wrong place and the wrong time, that they became monsters. He wanted to put them into the right... context. It just came back to me in this dream.'

'On this world,' said Gila, 'he would be thought of as a great and benevolent vizier, your Doctor.' It was a rare compliment from the alligator man.

'I suppose he would.'

'Benevolent viziers don't last long here,' said Gila harshly. "This is a rough world.You've seen that.'

And again Sam had that sense that the Doctor was too good, too unworldly, for this world or any other. Yet he had managed to survive. He managed. He went forward in all his beliefs...

'Integrity, I suppose is what he has,' she said, eyeing Gila.

'Well, we can't afford that, on Hyspero,' he said shortly, and in that moment Sam got a glimpse of the real Gila. She thought, Eventually, he'll betray us. Gila's only with us while it suits him. Sooner or later... he'll turn.

They walked.

Sam knew that when the Doctor had talked about feeling sad for the exiled Skarasen he'd seen years before, he was talking, at some level, about himself. Despised, monstrous, caught in its pitiful, ineluctable exile. She had pieced together enough of his sketchy previous life to know that once he had spent time in England, forced to stay there by his own people. Exiled, he had tried to acclimatise himself to England of the seventies. Right before I was born, Sam thought, and in my very earliest years, the Doctor was already world-weary and stuck. He had lived in a dilapidated Victorian house in Kent, called on occasionally by his secret-service contacts, by other offworld visitors, by old human friends. He earned his keep on Earth by repelling unfriendly alien incursions, and the nefarious schemes of a rival, known only as the Master. The Doctor of those years, Sam had discovered, was an elegant, patrician, establishment Doctor, who hobnobbed with royalty and politicians.

Sam found it hard to believe in these previous selves of his. Yet she knew they existed. They were with him all the time. At times he would vanish into himself, as if consulting those inner voices. But he was her only Doctor, the one that she knew: raffish and roguish, naive and inexplicable. Funny to think of those previous hims.

She was still thinking about her dream. His horrible mirth at her terror. The heads on stakes. She could rationalise it: she knew it all came from the tales of the Scarlet Empress and her seers in the palace. But she had this fear of those who weren't exactly what they seemed. The Doctor couldn't help, occasionally, being just that.

But she wished he was here.

He was above ground, no doubt muddling along with Iris. She had seen an image of him in the temple, even if only a dream image. Somehow she knew she would see him again in the Forest of Kestheven. Of course they had been separated before. She knew the cosmos ran

along fairly shaky lines of random coincidence and mischance. But these were the Doctor's natural element. Hers too, she decided. All she had to do was press on.

Chapter Sixteen
I've Been Possessed by the Best of Them

Following their two major rows the Doctor and Iris barely spoke to each other for a week. They drove in stolid silence through the southern valleys of Hyspero, swapping turns at the wheel without a word. They cooked in silence, ate in silence, and when they went off to their separate bunks, on separate decks of the bus, it was without a single goodnight. Iris reflected sadly that the Time Lord capacity to maintain a sulky blackout of communications was prodigious. They were as bad as each other; with hundreds of years to fill, there was no hurry to make it up. Iris was blaming herself, however. It was she who, as the Doctor angrily put it, effectively abandoned their companions in Fortalice. She was obsessed with her quest. He had been all in favour of going back, but had given in to her determination. She placated him, saying that Sam and Gila would surely make their own way to Kestheven. They knew that was the next port of call. They weren't stupid, or without resources. She and the Doctor couldn't risk using Iris's TARDIS for short hops any more, trying to find their friends. They couldn't risk returning to Fortalice. And they were too far south to drive back now. They could only press on. Surlily, the Doctor gave in.

For days they traversed the crisscrossing valley roads, which became lusher and more verdant. They were approaching a different, more hospitable country and yet the Doctor wouldn't let that lighten his mood. A great river pulled and surged alongside them, and they watched flocks of gaudy flamingo-like birds follow its course. They watched in a distinctly uncompanionable silence.

Their second row had come when the Doctor was upstairs reading one day as Iris drove. She'd known it was a mistake to let him rummage among her shelves. Somewhere between the Edgar Rice Burroughs and the William S. Burroughs she had stowed her own capacious volumes of memoirs. As she concentrated on the rutted, narrow road, she realised that the Doctor would have found them, would be reading them in appalled horror. Sure enough, he came thudding down the stairwell and started yelling at her.

'It's my record of my life,' she protested, looking round. He had a heap of the handwritten volumes held out accusingly before him.'Maybe you can keep all your thoughts in order, can keep your sanity no matter how much you skip about in time. Maybe memory means nothing to you. But

it does to me. I'd like to have evidence, in the end, of how I've lived.'

'But this is a farrago of lies and deceit...!' said the Doctor. 'And outright stealing!'

She turned back to the road. She wanted to tell him the memoirs were all meant for him. It was her gift to him, when she eventually vanished from time and he, as she knew he would, carried on. Her journals were sometimes apocryphal, of course. They were a tapestry woven hastily and frequently on the hoof, a vivid phantasmagoria of maybes and might-have-beens.'If these ever got into the wrong hands...'the Doctor said, shaking his head.'I've just read the material about the Death Zone. You're not meant to have been there! All these descriptions of the Tower, the secrets of Rassilo n..."

'Since when did you care about that stuff?'

'I don't leave a trail behind me, for others to find.'

'You know what you sound like?'

'Go on.'

'Like that vizier in the library you were telling me about. When you were still speaking to me. And like the librarian himself. No imagination. Suppressing the detail, the possibility, the variety of life. Censoring people's texts.'

The Doctor flushed.

'And,' she went on, seizing her advantage.'You sound a mite like that last incarnation of yours. A portentous little feller, swaggering around, thinking he's got all the world's darkest secrets under his hat. Defending the secrets of time, indeed. Guardian of Forever. Time's Champion, my arse.You were a pretentious old thing then, Doctor, and you got on my nerves, frankly. I thought you'd pulled yourself out of those doldrums.'

He frowned.'Well,I...'

'Look. The cosmos, as you and I both know, is wider and more complex, and much more apocryphal than either you or I can ever know. Nothing's going to interfere with that. And certainly not an old woman's diaries. You keep running around, thinking that anyone tampering with timelines,

tinkering with balances, changing the plot can end the universe in a nasty flash. It isn't true. You've grown scared

of your own shadow.You sound so... establishment, these days. Maybe it's to do with your gender.'

He bridled. 'What does that make you? The great feminist reinterpreter of patriarchal Gallifrey? Pleading the endless polymorphous perversity of time and possibility?'

'Yes,' she said simply.'Time is more resilient than you can imagine. It's a male ego that thinks it can alter it all by pulling a few strings. Look at the Master - that pitiful, deluded, phallocentric dope.'

'I don't believe this,' said the Doctor.

'You're a little guy, Doctor, like me. A vagabond. We just muddle through. And I...' She glared at him beadily. 'I can write exactly what I want.' He could see that he wouldn't get any further with this one.'And, by the way,' she went on,'I did, actually, go to the Death Zone. Morbius did come back and reactivate the time scoop. Just because no one told you doesn't mean it didn't happen.'

'But... look at this bit... You didn't foil the Dalek invasion of Earth in the twenty-second century. I did! It was me and Susan and Ian and Barbara! And the Cyber tombs on Telos... You weren't there, Iris. I was. You weren't to be seen!'

'That's your story,' she smiled. 'In my version, it was me. With my glamorous young assistant Jeremy. With every one of our peremptory arrivals, we fork off into, another version - surely you know that?

'So your version has more validity than mine?' he asked bitterly.

'Not necessarily.We can coexist, can't we? We have parallel lives, pasts and futures. I'm stopping this bus for lunch.' They lurched to a halt. 'Mind you, I've got written evidence of my version. What do you have?'

He turned and stumped back up to the top deck, furious. She cackled and made them lunch in the restocked galley. But it took days before the Doctor would speak to her again.

***

In tunnels still dense with fronds and vines and thickly whorled flowers, both Sam and Gila expected at any moment to be met by Our Lady. The fact that they were allowed to go traipsing on like this, shuffling forward through the treacherous undergrowth, meant either that they had escaped or that this was a trap. The usual choice. But Our Lady did not appear.

Curious that the plants down here grew without light. The flowers were anaemic and cold to touch; the furled petals of the lilies were like old, damp paper.

All they could do was press on, and hope they would emerge into daylight soon. They had no idea what direction they were heading in, until they came to a chamber that illuminated itself fitfully at their approach. They discovered that its walls were painted with maps and charts. Precisely what the Doctor had been looking for above ground. The paint here on the walls was chipped and scabrous, and the charts were incomplete. Figures of animals and trees swarmed to fill in the cartographer's blank spaces; they were represented with the touching, weightily symbolic care of religious iconography. The charts, Gila observed, resembled those imprinted on the tattooed hides of the Empress's Scarlet Guard.

In the centre of the ceiling they found Fortalice, presented as the centre - the sensible, knowable median of the world of Hyspero. Lines of routes, frontiers and contours ran out to craze and furcate all the walls of the room. Fortalice was like the point in the ice at which a stone is dropped; the rest is cracked, with hairlines jagging out from that single point.

Starting from Fortalice, they studied the myriad lines running south. The Forest of Kestheven crept down the southern wall of the chapel -Sam couldn't help finding the whole frescoed room creepily religious. The forest, with individually painted trees, lovingly emblematic trees of no type she had ever seen before, was faded a muddy, olive green. It looked like a shaggy beard of mould on that wall.

"That's where we're going,' Gila said and tried to untangle the routes. Overland, through the valleys.

Sam started. 'We're already on the route, look.' She had found a drawing of the tunnel, and even of this chapel. It looked like a bubble in a tube of mercury. She peered, and Gila peered, and they found that the drawing

of this room even included the maps on the wall. Maps of maps. And, standing staring at the maps on the walls, were two tiny, thumbnail figures, holding a light. "That makes me dizzy,' Sam said. Infinite regression, the Doctor had called it once, using a number of mirrors and a small plastic Dalek to explain a point in temporal physics. She looked away.

'This tunnel appears to connect with an underground river,' whispered Gila.'If we travel down that... we end up here.'

He pointed at the overpopulous heart of the forest.

'Good,' she said, suppressing a shudder.

Then they traced the overland route, the longer route through the valleys.'I hope,' she said,'the Doctor manages to find the way.'

Gila grunted.'I think they already have.'

He pointed to a painted cleft in the rock, where the going seemed particularly hard. And there - she could hardly credit it - was a naive but unmistakable painting of a double-decker bus, livid scarlet, and beside it, two figures, staring out for the way to turn.

'It's a map for all time,' breathed Gila. 'Representing events as well as places.'

"They're on their way, then,' said Sam. She looked at the green and grey daub that was meant to be the Doctor. His shock of brown hair. Iris came off worse: a smear of yellow and blue, fat with her arms akimbo.

'I wish we could roll this up and take it with us,' Sam said.

'I have an excellent memory.'

'You would.'

'Usually I need only look at a map once. But this is different. It changes in response to events and the endless changeableness of the topography of Hyspero. I have heard tales of this room. On all of Hyspero, only the stars and this room are still. Everything, everything else alters.'

'Let's get on,' she said.'Find this river.'

She hated the idea of standing still in a place that was constant. And she was wary of Gila's fascination with the charts.

'I could find my birthplace... I could find out what happened to them...'

'No, Gila. We have to go.'

His eyes tracked back across the walls to find the wicked city of Hyspero. At its northern point, in a gaudy, domed palace, he located the Scarlet Empress. He hissed and pointed it out to Sam.

'We have to come all the way back here, eventually.'

"That's some distance we have to cover.' She felt quite small, gazing at the spread mass of the ancient planet and almost wished they were embroiled in one of those missions that involved only a few corridors and a control room or two. The hugeness of Hyspero, its measureless deserts and seas began to alarm her. In a smallish, underground cavern Sam felt the first twinges of a misplaced agoraphobia.

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Goodness, well, you talk about mind specialists, about spiritual takeover plans, about mind probes, brain probes, hypnotism, soul stealing, and I've seen them all. I've been possessed by the best of them. Or rather, the best of that parasitic breed and brood have tried to dabble with my mind and, at one time or another, have attempted to take me over. Strapped to tables, electrodes snaking all over the shop, sensitive suckers stuck on my temples, leeching out the memories, the sensations, and the essences. Like a dying man again and again I've seen my life flashing before my eyes. I make a very encumbered existentialist. I try hard, but my past is always catching up with me.

At one time it seemed to me that no one I met could be very happy with their lot, since all of them were wanting to possess the spirits (to use an unwieldy term) of everyone else. All this possession going on -there was quite a rash of it. Well, you know me. I was never very possessive. You can't be, can you?

What I feel about Iris now is most peculiar. I'm sure she thinks I'm in a huff, and maybe I am. She should know my moods by now. When I don't

feel like talking I take myself off. It's what I always do. On the whole I'm a sociable creature, but... sometimes you have to retreat a little.

She is encroaching on me. Not just my space, though that is bad enough. This trip, with the two of us on the bus, we have to negotiate, quite explicitly and carefully, our space and privacy. It isn't like my ship. I can't go wandering off. It rather reminds me of that sleigh trip I made on the ice fields of Myrrh... oh, I don't know how long ago, in a very cramped space for two whole months with those little fellows who looked like poodles.

Iris does prattle on. I thought I was bad enough, these days, when I can't seem to stop myself gabbling about plans, strategies... all these spontaneous effusions of mine. I can't remember a time when I was more chatty, but Iris takes the biscuit. Last night I had a twenty-minute lecture on how her TARDIS maintains a constant supply of fresh water. I'd already figured out that she must have connected her tanks to some pocket dimension, but she went on and on about how the tank in the galley takes water from a private, immense reservoir that she's sampled (read 'stolen') from Canada. Iris said she sometimes wants to squeeze herself up through her own kitchen taps, through the rusted pipes, into that pure, watery immensity. All I could think about was the virtual pressure on the pipes, the massive, insistent mass on the back of the bus. I don't think she quite understands the implications of her dabbling with transdimensional, um... things. The interstices are, to her, a matter of household convenience and even fun.

The thing is, the more she talks about things that she's got up to, the places she's been, the people she's met - in whatever dimension (we'll call them that for convenience) - the more I end up thinking these things over in the precious hours I manage to get to myself, I dwell over Iris's stories. Not just the ones that seem oddly similar to my own. She also works at reminding me of the times that we have spent together, all over the place, on the occasions that our hazardous paths have intersected. These memories do disturb me because, once she has cheerfully triggered them, they are quite definitely there. These things, it seems, really did happen to me. Now I can see them in Technicolor, Cinemascope, with wraparound sound.Yet I would never have recalled them without her gentle conversational sifting and prodding. It makes me wonder how many pockets of memory I habitually repress or ferret away. (There's an unnerving analogy to be made, I suppose, between my own unfathomable past and the chilly Canadian lake banked and brimming behind Iris's transdimensional waterworks - if that isn't too infelicitous a

phrase.)

See how insidiously her blithe garrulousness works on me?

One day recently - and I've lost track of time, so don't ask me - we stopped the bus and walked in the woods which have sprung up all around us, spectacularly untamed and lush.'Remember,' she began, and I shuddered, knowing that she was off again on some ghastly reminiscence. That day she was in a purple turban and scarf, with dark glasses, and her lips were scarlet and prim.'Remember that terrible fight you got into when we visited Gertrude Stein at 27 Rue de Fleurus and Picasso was there and he'd brought Jean Cocteau and you -'

'Iris,' I snapped, 'if this is something you're just making up, I don't want to hear it.'

'Oh, you must remember it. Gertrude's girlfriend, Alice B. Toklas, had been cooking all night and day and she'd laid on a lovely spread. Gertrude tried to flatter all her painter guests by sitting them around the table, each directly opposite a painting of their own that she had bought. It was a beautiful room, full of fresh Matisses and Picassos, all hugger-mugger and lit by rather decadent candelabra. And you picked a fight with Gertrude because of her recent book, in which she claimed to be individually responsible for creating Dada, surrealism, and cubism...'

I frowned.'When was this?'

'About 1935. AfterThe Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas was published.'

'In my time, I mean.'

'Oh. Let me think. You had that nice girl with you, Jo. You were in a blue velvet smoking jacket and your hair had turned a shocking white. You cut quite a dash in Paris that autumn. Set tongues wagging on the Left Bank. You claimed to have just come from Spiridon, which was overrun by half-frozen Daleks...'

'Oh yes,' I said and then, suddenly, I could see it all. The thirties had rather suited Jo. She loved meeting the painters and writers of the period and I was glad to show her a place where she wasn't in continuous peril. She expected to despise Picasso, but found herself maddeningly charmed by him.

'You were there,' I said to Iris.'You took Stein's side against me. You said that she had every right to rewrite cultural history and put herself at the centre, if that's what she wanted to do.'

'Exactly,' said Iris smugly.

'And we took the train together. Jo wanted to see Berlin. To catch the Cabaret.'

Iris nodded grimly. 'And we saw them all before they were famous. Christopher Isherwood when he was living on the Nollendorfstrasse, with that terrible floozy who sang and kept trying to get him into bed. And poor Chris was only there in the city for the boys.'

'I've forgotten half the people I've met...' I said.

'How can you forget Isherwood? Auden shuffling about in his dressing gown and slippers? Stein with all her paintings and dogs?'

I shrugged helplessly. 'You tend to forget the quieter moments. I remember the more hair-raising scrapes.'

'Scrapes.' She shook her head at me. 'You should act your age more.'

'I remember meeting Greta Garbo in California,' I said.

'I don't:

'No, you weren't there, were you?' I smiled. 'It was a picnic in a dusty valley. Isherwood was there, too, with Bertrand Russell and Aldous Huxley. Garbo went up a tree for me. She shinned right up to pick me some figs. She was a funny thing, much more approachable and chatty than she was supposed to be.'

Iris looked piqued by this.'You met Garbo? She climbed up a tree for you?'

'You're so easily impressed, Iris,' I laughed. 'Such a name-dropper. People are just people.'

'Yes,but... Garbo!'

'I told her I'd met the real Queen Christina in a previous life. I said she

had caught something of Christina's true essence when she played her in that ridiculous, camp film.'

'You show-off.What did Garbo say? Did she think you were bananas?'

'She threw back her head and laughed at me. That sweet chuckle of hers. But she believed every word of it.'

Iris tutted and glowered at me.

That night we drove deeper into the Forest of Kestheven.

We were keeping our eyes peeled for the golden bears.

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When they came to the river it was about twenty feet across. It was powerful, though, coursing thickly through the carved walls of the tunnel. The noise was deafening as Sam and Gila stood on the wet bank and watched thick dark ropes of water churn swiftly past. "There could be anything in there,' Sam said.

Gila could hardly restrain his pleasure at the sight.

He leapt in without a word, and didn't emerge for some time. Sam sat down to wait.

When he returned he clambered exhausted on to the bank.'It's thick with life,' he said, eyes gleaming. 'Nothing very familiar. It goes very deep, too - a dark seam right into the earth.'

'Marvellous.'

'And it seems the only way to go. We have to travel down the river.'

'I can't swim that, Gila.' The water would exhaust her in minutes, she thought. She hated to admit it to him, but Sam had learned to respect her limitations. It didn't do to just throw herself in at the deep end every time.

'We need a boat,' said Gila. 'A raft of some kind.'

So they set to work on the dead albino plants around the bank. The

wood was white and brittle and snapped free quite easily. Sam foraged and brought back load after load, wearing herself out as she lugged back trunks much taller than herself. Gila worked busily, contentedly, constructing their raft. He was very skilled and chuntered on about his childhood and learning the ways of the swamps. By raft had been the only way to explore his earliest, benighted landscape. He soaked vines and tied the trunks, pulling them tight and leaving them to dry, sometimes hastening the process with a belch of lightly roasting flame.

'Build us a fire, would you?' said Sam. "This is going to take all night.'

'Night?' Gila asked.'You mean you have some idea of what time it is?'

This brought her up short.'No, I haven't.'

They kept going till the craft was finished and it sat there, looking flimsy and unimpressive on the black shore.

"This is what I'm trusting my life to?'

'I'm afraid so.' Gila shrugged. 'We'll be all right.'

Then they slept beside it, to replenish their strength before the off. Sam woke, hours later, to see Gila stripping two thinnish poles of their bark and leaves. He explained they would have one each, to guide the craft, punting themselves off the low, dripping ceiling of the tunnel. Sam hauled herself to her feet and thought miserably of driving the bus, and how she had loved that endless, easy road opening up before her.

Chapter Seventeen
Telling Tales

So they were building their raft and preparing themselves to go white watering or black watering or whatever it is they call it. Plunging headlong and heedlessly I call it, giving yourself up to the recklessness of water. I myself like to be in command of where I'm going and the means by which I'm getting there.

I'm Iris, remember? We're back in my journals - these cramped, recollected notes cribbed after the event which, of course, might well lessen your suspense, dearest reader, in that my narrating from the future, back on past events, alerts you to the fact that I at least survived! Ah, but in what form? That's what you have to ask yourself. The thing about someone of my gifts and faculties is that even now, when I speak to you from the future, you still don't know how I came through these shenanigans. Or if I even did. So back up goes the suspense level. Crank it up. The Doctor and I were in dire peril again - naturally.

Because it was round about this time, during our peregrinations in the gaudy and perplexing Forest of Kestheven that we were gathered up and captured - ah, captured; how that verb makes your ears prick up -by certain birds of paradise.

I call them that, but I never knew their true name. I was never very scientific. Not like the Doctor who, seemingly without effort, could pull out of his hat the preferred and correct race name, species type etc., etc., of any of the creatures and peoples he encountered. It was he who gave me a ticking off for still calling (rather picturesquely, I thought) the Earth Reptiles we had both encountered Silurians and Sea Devils. Very incorrect, he said solemnly - as bad as those creatures calling human beings ape primitives.Well.

What these birds looked like to me, at any rate, were birds of paradise. Each one distinct and gorgeously arrayed. They alighted in a loose and splendid ring about us one day when we were a fair distance from the sanctuary of my bus. The Doctor had decided that we ought to forage on ahead, checking out the backwaters of the woods, where the bus couldn't penetrate the gloom. The air whirred, buzzed and hummed as the birds riffled heavily down through the lofty branches. Each stared at us beadily, the tallest of them fully seven feet high. What a hat I could make, I found myself thinking, just by plucking up the golden, crimson,

aquamarine plumes they had shed as they settled on the ground around us. But I suppressed the thought. It seemed that we were in rather grave danger.

Beside me the Doctor was rigid with surprise and a certain wariness. I looked and this time was struck by the savage hooked bills of the birds. Each was dull black and gold and they were sharp as knives. Their claws were lizard-like and dextrous as those of any humanoid species.

So we stood for some moments, appraising each other. Then our stillness was broken by the Doctor's sudden, violent sneezing.'I must be allergic,' he said, frowning, and sneezing again.

Then one of the birds, a shabby brown wren, said in a nasal and bored-sounding voice,'Bring these two aloft.'

And before we could say a word in our defence or protest, we were gripped by those scaled, prehensile claws and the air was whisked up into a feathery, leafy storm once more, as we were borne high up into the trees, where the birds had established a society and a city of their own. It was quite absurd; I clutched my bag and my clothing to me as I was lifted, quite gently, really, and focused on the Doctor as he sneezed and sneezed, bundled into the ample breast of an equally stricken-looking and disdainful roc.

When we were set down again, it was on to a surprisingly steady platform constructed from a kind of grey wattle and daub. The birds had built themselves an intricate system of tree houses and walkways from the detritus of the forest floor. We were bullied wordlessly into a covered pen, some several hundred feet up an ancient tree, and forced to sit in the company of a family of terrifled-looking swine.

Wearily the Doctor rubbed his nose and blew it hard into his hanky.'I think that's the first animal allergy I've ever developed.'

I wasn't surprised. There was a hothouse stink in this canopy of trees. The pigs stank, too. They were huddled in a dark corner of the straw-filled pen, glaring at us with alarm.

'I think we're in the larder,' I said.

The Doctor shushed me in case I alarmed the pigs any more. He addressed them.'How long have you been here?'

'I don't think they can talk.'

'Jo Grant once told me that about a bunch of chickens we met. She laughed at me for being overly polite.'

'Those chickens that picked us up aren't very polite.'

'Exactly.'

The black, hairy pigs snuffled and shuffled in the straw and never said a word.

'I hate being derailed like this,' the Doctor said.

'I imagine,' I said, stretching out on the lumpy floor.'that they'll let us know soon what they have in mind for us.'

'Sometimes all of life seems to be about who takes whom prisoner,' he complained.

"That's the company you keep.'

'I think I've become addicted to that wonderful moment when you spring free of a trap. When you think the game is up and you'll never get out. Then, suddenly, you're out, clean as a whistle, and a player again.'

'Oh, Doctor,' I chuckled at him.

'What?' I shrugged. 'You're laughing at me.'

'Perhaps.'

'Well, don't:

'You know,' I said.'I'm probably one of the few people who knew you when you were in that very first incarnation of yours. Newly on the run from Gallifrey. So young. So impetuous.Your hair not even white yet.You looked younger then than you do now. A bit of a bruiser you looked. A hothead.'

'Was I really?'

'You'd flung yourself into the French Revolution.You'd freed yourself from dungeon after dungeon. A proper Scarlet Pimpernel. And back then you said exactly the same thing to me. You told me what you've just told me now. That your biggest thrill was magicking yourself out of captivity.'

'So I haven't changed much?'

'Not at all,' I said, and he sighed.

'I'm not as much of a... what did you call it? A bruiser?'

'Your first self was.When he was young, at any rate. A touch of the old Empire about him. No, you're not the same as that. More so than your other selves, I get the impression that now you are more... magnanimous, perhaps. You go out of your way to get to know people, in a way that you never did before. You're much less of the mystery man.'

'There's only so long,' he said,'that you can hold yourself apart from the rest of the world.'

I must admit, I felt my hearts jump up daringly at his words.Yet I still couldn't ask him what he felt about me. It would be ridiculous and grotesque, perhaps, to even try. I didn't want to become just one more thing for him to escape.

Then I thought, How ridiculous. That we're stuck in a roomful of pigs bred for fodder by a race of bloody parrots and I'm thinking about a man I've loved for hundreds of years. And it became a whole lot more ridiculous when we were dragged, under protest, into the birds' council chamber and made to talk. The birds, it seemed were fond of stories. And we were made to talk for our lives.

The self-satisfied wren-like leader sat on a plinth, surrounded by a motley guard and listened to us as we were forced to blether on in a ragged, improvised duet. The rafters were full of brilliant birds, all listening to us. I thought of Scheherazade in the old, old tale, talking for her life and that of her sister, bargaining with the bloodthirsty sultan, who was just as fond of tall tales. That night the Doctor and I racked our brains. We had a lot of stories to tell.

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Already they had travelled some miles aboard the uncomfortable craft that Gila had knocked together from bits and pieces. There was something quite balmy and relaxing about simply letting themselves be tugged along by the boiling current like that. They hardly needed to punt themselves at all. Gila stretched out and dozed, content to give himself up to the elements.

Sam lay beside him. It was like being in somebody's bloodstream and heading for the heart. She couldn't quite be sure if it was any lighter yet. Her eyes were playing tricks on her, and maybe she was just becoming used to this gloom.

A noise roused her out of her half-sleep. She saw those pale metal hands clutching themselves together again, flapping and wheeling like a rainbird. The eyeballs goggled curiously on the ends of their digits at Sam and the still-sleeping alligator man. The hands of the Duchess winged effortlessly over them, and then passed on ahead into the tunnel, as if showing them the way. Then the hands were swallowed up in the dark.

The next time she woke it was from a deeper sleep and she found her nose and lungs filled with burning, sulphurous fumes. The raft was beginning to rock wildly as the river buffeted them between the cavern walls. The yellow-tinged water boiled and heaved. It looked like lager, Sam thought, and smelled of rotten eggs. She shook Gila awake.

'What is it?'

"The going's getting rougher.'

'It's all right,' he grunted, wanting to rest some more. "This thing is sturdy enough...'

At that precise moment one of the perilous cross-currents caught them and pitched the raft into the air, sending it skimming across the swift, perplexing tides, and smashing it to matchwood. Sam and Gila were tossed deep into the river.

They fell like stones through the dense yellow and green, down to the more turgid currents.

Here moments took on their own momentum, and the two of them were flung into a different sense of passing time. They didn't know how to

breathe. They thought they were dead. Sam couldn't recall the exact second of succumbing to the dark and giving herself up for dead, but it must have happened, because she had stopped trying to swim. She let the glaucous depths swallow her.

Then she saw the shapes moving uncertainly through the unclear water. The light was only fitful and so she couldn't be sure of exactly what she was seeing. She started to swim again and held her breath hard and she steeled herself for accidental contacts with the creatures who shared the water.

And what would their flesh feel like? like a shark's, perhaps, so that she'd be flayed at the slightest touch. Or it would be like brushing the softly pliable transparency of jellyfish, and waiting for the jolt of a sting. But none of the creatures were making sudden moves and she tried not to get sucked into a false sense of security by them. She moved steadily, coursing strongly towards the surface again, which stretched like rippled skin high above. She kept Gila within sight; he was making his own, steady progress.

The creatures seemed content to let her be, yet she could swear they were keeping an eye on her, though there were no eyes to be seen.

Slowly they tumbled and twirled, mauve- and grey-fleshed bulks revolving in the murk. Something about the very anonymity of their forms deterred the eye. She tried to keep the mass of a particularly menacing aubergine-shaped beast at a distance. It was smoothly featureless; she couldn't tell which end was which, but it was clearly sentient. It roved from side to side in agonising restlessness, probing the chilled filth of the river. An ebony pyramid of some fleshy, coruscated substance shot out a coronet of obscene-looking spines at her approach and Sam's heart thudded at the sight. She tried to bear away from it and, luckily, the thing made no attempt to follow. She was running out of air; her lungs burned and seemed to be cramming themselves up into her throat. Her limbs ached and she felt quite separated from all her exertions as her body strove upward of its own accord.

Purplish starfish creatures moved past her curiously, taking her in, all the while. Their blank fingers were like velvet gloves and very dextrous. They spun in perfect formation and ringed about her, each spreading to its utmost, which was about the size of a dinner table. Their eyes, set squarely in those dark palms, were quite human, disconcertingly so, and they blinked regularly, declaring a sort of passive incredulity.

Sam thought, If I wasn't here, if Gila and I hadn't ended up here, then no one would ever know these creatures existed. She had touched some form of life she had never expected, nor suspected, and the thought of that thrilled her. If we weren't here, these bizarre vegetable-like things in their cold broth need never even be here, or they'd just be carrying on, about their lustreless business. For once she was glad to see something new and find that it wasn't trying to kill her or eat her or hypnotise her. Not every new experience was painful and not every novelty deadly. That was worth remembering. The Doctor had promised her... everything. He had promised to boggle her mind, and when he had said that, gleefully, expansively, she had laughed at his old-fashioned, schoolboy slang.

Sam's own thoughts were interrupted by those of the creatures she was watching. They were talking to her for some time before she even realised it. The shapes of the creatures made no rash moves, didn't attempt to impede her gradual progress, but their voices invaded her head.

He's sent you on a false journey, they said. He has plunged on ahead as he always does, pretending to flout the Laws of Time and Patriarchy and God, but his quest, as ever, is all religion. A religion of himself, and he is the pure martyr setting his sensible feet firmly towards the Dark Tower. Tower, Sam - he is leading you towards one more confrontation with the father and the phallic Tower is the last, black card in the Doctor's pack.

But you don't have to go with him. A woman's journey is different. A woman's journey is to the source, to the briny superabundance of the world that man will never know. Leave him to his phallic quest - his probe into the Real. Come with us, back to the Imaginary, to the time before. Come back to the Mother.

'Who are you on about?' Sam found herself asking. She didn't like the sound of this. All this 'we' and 'him'. In her travels she'd encountered a number of cults, busily recruiting and taking others over; she'd seen mob mentality run riot. She played dumb. She didn't want these voices in her head. But she asked them,'Who are you on about? Gila?'

Then she looked and saw with a shock that Gila was caught up by the dark, huddled creatures. They had gathered their obtuse shapes and held him penned in, afloat in the dense water.

'Let him go! He'll drown!'

'He will last a good while longer than you will here,' they said.'Sister.'

'Don't call me sister.'

'Nevertheless, you belong with us. Do you truly believe that you belong with this alligator creature? Look in his eyes, Samantha Jones. He is all naked avarice. He is domination and fury, like all his gender. He is nothing but show. Do you think he has respect in those eyes? What do you suppose he is thinking when he looks at you?'

By now their dextrous extrusions were all about Gila and his struggles were slowing. Either he was reserving his strength or he was passing out.

'He wants you, Samantha Jones. When you fell into our element, when your petty, pathetic raft broke its back on the water and you plunged into our world, we saw it all at once, all too clear. He desires you for his use, for his own harem. He looks at you and sees only an assemblage of female accoutrements designed for his use.'

'I agree,'said Sam,'that he can be a bit of sexist tosser...'

'More than that,' the voice went on. 'He is racked with an unappeasable nostalgia for the Imaginary, before his boy's engagement with the world of man. He identifies the fetid swamps of his boyhood with the mother's body from which he was born. He loathes and desires it at once. All he can do is take it, take it ruthlessly in as many forms as he can, and abuse that woman's body when he finds it. And he has fallen upon you.'

'I can deal with him,' said Sam grimly.

'You think you know the ways of these men.'

'Look, who are you?'

'You don't see how they repress you.You are such a child. You speak true, you speak your whole mind and body and you trust that it is speaking the truth. You are all diffusion; you have no focus. You fling your trembling body into the void and trust that no harm will come to you, yet how can it not when you have dealings with the world of men?'

'I can look after myself.'

'When we talked of the greater danger, of the man who leads you ever forward on his own messianic, masculine quest, we didn't mean this alligator creature.'

'You meant the Doctor.' Sam was astonished.

'He'll lead you on to your destruction, Samantha Jones. If not of your body, then your spirit. Bind yourself to his quest and you will lose for ever your link with the mother. With the delightful and blissful violence of our element. You will lose contact with that in you which makes all possible.'

'You talk about the Doctor like he's evil: 'He is a boy. He doesn't know what he is doing.'

'Yeah?'

'He is full of sickness for a home he can never return to. His own pedigree is so complex, he has no single home. He was woven from genetic broth, a Loom, on a Patriarchal world without mothers - though sometimes he believes he was birthed of a more Earthly mother. He doesn't know and, whichever way, the Doctor is confused about his origin. He will always search after it. He has a boy's journey to make. He wants to appropriate his point of origin only for himself and die there. He wants to die a man. He'll plunge back into time, further, further back, hoping to demythologise himself, by going back into mythology. If you go with him, Sam, it will destroy you.'

Sam was oddly touched by this. She held still in the water and realised that she was suspended in a bubble of viscous air. It was like a blob of oil in a lava lamp. The voice gave her a moment to think. She said,'I trust him.'

'You are a fool. You know that a woman's quest is different. She already is her own mother. We are in and in and in each other, like Russian dolls of your world. We don't need that all-consuming quest for the source. Our journey is further.We head for the unknown.We are free to invent.'

'You've got the Doctor all wrong. He's not a sexist pig like Gila.'

'He can't help what he is. His gender is alien, but intransigent. The

cosmos is guided by male and female impulses - quite separate...'

"That's crap!' Sam shouted."The Doctor isn't your average man, at all. I don't think he even has a gender. How can you - whoever you are - pontificate on what he's like? He's private. He's untouchable.'

'He's a man.'

'I love him,' Sam found herself saying. With a shock, she realised she was telling the creatures the truth. The voice stayed quiet and she let herself absorb what she had just blurted. Love. Still. With it came no shame or surprise. Obviously, she thought, I've moved on a bit from the fixation stage, past the embarrassment-at-covert-glances stage. No longer was she frightened by his proximity. She had come through a change. She loved him, but that was all right. She loved him enough to step back and let him go wherever he needed to. She didn't want him in the way she had wanted him once.'I love him,' she repeated.

'He spurned your desire.'

'It wasn't like that.'

'You were curious about his own desires.'

'Of course I was.'

'But you have never seen or heard him articulate anything of the sort.'

'Sometimes... odd glimpses. The way he looks at certain people. Women and men. But he never acts on anything. There's something about him that makes you think he's beyond sex.'

The voice of the creatures chuckled inside her head, reverberating like a seashell. 'Is anyone beyond gender and sex, Samantha Jones?'

Then suddenly, she and Gila were set free and left to float gently, unharmed, to the choppy surface.

Into daylight. They were free of the tunnel.

They had come a long way.

Sam wondered about asking him what he had seen down there. She

thought better of it, but eventually Gila spoke up of his own account. 'It was the slaver. The slaver came back to me. He came back and told me I was returning to the sludge, the primeval sludge and that I deserved to. He told me I wouldn't be human for very much longer. He said I was an animal.'

Sam didn't know what to say to that.

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This Doctor had never been very good at remembering stories. In the same way that he couldn't tell a joke, when it came to telling stories, he found that he could never work out what had to come next. Never could he figure out how the plot worked. Maybe, he thought, that was why he wandered so haplessly into events in his real, everyday life. Previous selves of his hadn't thought of themselves as quite so guileless. Unlike them, he wasn't apt to go back to the start of things, to ravel back the plot lines to lay clues for himself, and to plant surprises. To him, that would seem like cheating. No longer did he think of himself as the shifty, anonymous auteur, manipulating chance and circumstance to suit himself.

Tonight, forced to talk for his life before the parliament of exotic and razor-billed birds, he felt his well of stories dry up. He found he had no idea what might entertain them.

He remembered Romana dragging him off to the opera in Milan and then to see the marvellous soprano hermaphrodites of Alpha Centauri. He had never seen them before. Romana was rapt, of course, following the score from their gilded box. The Doctor had been bored, unable to keep up and follow, itching to be off and wanting something else to happen.

Tonight he would have to depend on Iris's help. Luckily she was an old gasbag. But she made him go first.

How the birds shuffled and stirred and what a racket of approval, disappointment and uneasiness they set up. He found that they hung on his every word, their pinhead eyes watching his every move, and he started to warm to his theme.

First he told them fables, which he recalled he was very fond of. Once he started, he remembered more and more. He saw again how story

could lead to story. He told them the one about the greedy and eccentric merchant who wore a dressing gown and slippers everywhere and was laughed at in the street for looking so bizarre and it made him unhappy. One day he was caught up in a vast wind, and clung to a palm tree to anchor himself. At last he came to the land of the Turks, where everyone wore slippers and dressing gowns all day long, as a matter of course. At first he felt he fitted in, but eventually he grew bored with being ordinary.

The wren spoke up.'And what is the meaning of this tale?'

'Meaning?' frowned the Doctor. 'Sorry, I don't get you.'

'There must be meaning!' shrilled the wren. 'Stories must have a meaning. How else are we to be edified?'

'I'm not sure I hold with being edified,' said the Doctor sadly. 'Listen. I'll try another.'

Then he told them about the elephant who stole pumpkins from the patch that was a family's sole source of sustenance. This was an African tale. A boy hollowed out one pumpkin, crawled inside and hid. When the elephant king swallowed that choicest pumpkin whole, the boy waited until he was right inside the creature's belly, then he broke out of the orange skin and crawled upwards, to stab the elephant's greedy pink heart.

'Good,' cried one of the more extravagant birds, a kind of macaw. 'You are telling us that vengeance is good and best when it is merciless. That the oppressors will be tamed with violence.'

'Am I?' the Doctor wasn't sure that he was happy with this.

So he tried the one about the childless woman who adopted a bird to be her baby.

There were flurries of agitation in the rafters about this. Maybe I should have told another, he thought, but ploughed on.

The woman and her bird-child were mocked by her husband and his new wife, who was able to bear real children. Then the new wife ate the bird-child, roasting him on a spit, in order to distress the woman.

The parliament rose in uproar.

'It's all right!' The Doctor waved his hands.'It ends happily!' And he told how the bird-child, eaten by the husband and new wife, came back to life and clawed both their insides to pieces until they died.

This mollified the birds somewhat.

'All this is rather bloodthirsty, Doctor,' Iris told him. 'I would never have thought it of you.'

He shrugged and let her take over.

Iris began, "The Doctor has been bamboozling you all with tales of revenge and being eaten. He tells his tales this way in order to avoid talking about himself and his own life. Now I am going to tell you all about me and my life and the journeys I have been on, and the things I have seen...'

The Doctor looked pained.

'Get on with it, then,' warned the wren.

'I was born in the cradle of mountain tops,' said Iris.'Where the snow was fierce and daily, keeping us trapped in the house that was rooted into the rock by hundreds of storeys, rooted like a tooth in the jaws of the mountain.'

'Birds do not have teeth,' someone pointed out.

'And I was tended by my Aunties, some dozen of them in all, the most beloved of whom was my Baba, who had a shawl that could carry her anywhere in the world, because it was woven from the discarded feathers of every single bird known to our people.'

The room was silent.

The Doctor half listened as she described a life in the southern hemisphere of Gallifrey, which he knew very little about. And yet it seemed familiar, this wintry, fabulous vista she painted, in an oblique sort of way. All the while his eyes raked over the walls and ceiling of that raftered parliament, searching out a means of escape.

Iris told her long story, unspooling the endless tale of her earliest

adventures. She had them hooked.

Chapter Eighteen
Will You Come Back for Me?

Queens are quite common, here on Hyspero.

What does it take, how much effort does it require on this rough, shifting world, to lay claim to a province, a populace, even an entire city, and impress it with the force of your personality and the might of your will?

All over Hyspero tinpot tyrants run small principalities. Endlessly they plot skirmishes and wars against their neighbours, drawing up elaborate plans of conquest and colonisation, but they all know better than to try. There is a delicate equilibrium here, even on this chaotic world, and each small power balances the next. The small-time rulers of these various lands have learned to realise when they are well off.

Only the Scarlet Empress and her brood of nine hundred grandmothers behind her, each identical with her, thirst for more and more power. Her insatiably malign presence at the heart of Hyspero, in the city named for their world, bonds the other, lesser rulers in adversity and maintains the tentative structures of power here.

Few have actually laid eyes on the Empress. They have seen her guards - the squad of beautiful, tattooed men she sends out to patrol her world in their flowing crimson cloaks. They feel her might and hatred in many more or less insidious ways.

Yet one of those rulers of lesser lands, happy with her lot and content to be apart from the rest of Hyspero - happy in fact, never to return again to the rest of the world - is Angela, the Bearded Lady. Major Angela, self-declared queen of the forest and bears of Kestheven.

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That morning she was sitting with her thick legs upon the wooden garden furniture that Sutt had built her. He was showing himself to be a proper worker, that boy - one of her best. As she lay back on the white veranda, she could crane her neck and listen to him as he crashed about, checking the outer walls of her house for storm damage. He had complained to her that his fleshy hide was strawberry-marked with rashes and cuts. It wobbled as he shook the shutters and ambled thoughtfully about her garden. Angela tutted and sighed. After all these

years she still couldn't keep the bears from trying to shave themselves.

The sun was going in over the lowest part of the forest canopy. She could feel it drenching away on her skin. Days were so brief here. It was one of the things she'd had to grow used to, back when she had first come to rule in Kestheven, about a decade ago: that, generally, the sun penetrated only feebly into the heart of the forest. For ten years she had lived here, and for ten years she had been deprived of her sight. She was in full and confident possession of the belief, however, that her beard itself equipped her with a curious kind of sixth sense. It bristled and whispered things to her. Sometimes, unbeknown to her companions, Major Angela knew a little more about what was going on than she ought.

Blind, she had thought she wouldn't miss the sunlight, but she had been wrong. Her skin had turned sallow and pale in these intervening years of her self-exile. All the while, however, her impressive beard-growth had flourished. Once she had worn it as an insignia, a badge, a token of her oddity and singularity. Now it hung like an old man's, white and faded down her patched and faded battle fatigues. Angela, she told herself gruffly; you're an old, blind warhorse. That's what you are. She hauled herself up on to her comfy chair and barked a command at Sutt, her gardener:'Pack it in there for the afternoon, soldier. I think we're patched up quite nicely. Come and have some dinner.'

As she led the way indoors, her boots thudding resolutely on the bare, polished boards, she wondered about this. The old homestead wasn't half as solid as she'd hoped. This season's storms and gales had battered away at it nightly, carrying off whole walls and doors, wardrobes and window frames into the black winds of the night. It was most perplexing. If Angela - as Major Angela had once been known - had been a different sort of girl, a superstitious, silly son of girl, say, then she might have begun to think that her homestead and her little principality were under some kind of curse. Oh, but never. No one, she thought gruffly, would have the balls to set a curse on me.

Except, perhaps...

She dismissed the thought brusquely and had the hairless bears who were her servants batten down the hatches and the storm windows before the night came down with its customary vengeance. Her maid shuffled awkwardly around the dining table, clutching a lit taper in one clumsy hand, concentrating hard on lighting each stem of the

candelabra. The room pulsed with rosy shadows, oddly disquieting shadows that Angela could feel rather than see. The old mansion was full of draughts, noises and sudden gusts. Luckily it was also full of bears, each of whom was loyal to the last, and as savage as they were loyal to Major Angela; who, satisfied and extra hungry, seated herself at the head of her own glossy table and clapped her hands in anticipation of dinner.

'Where are the others?' she asked her maid. None of her chosen circle, the most articulate and amusing of her bears, were present. This she could sense. Lesser members of her court were shuffling into the chamber, smarting with shaving cuts, awkward in their human dress, all of them ambling to their correct spots around the room - but, she could tell, none of them were from her chosen few. None were part of the inner circle. Suddenly the maid sounded shifty in her demurrals.

'Where are they?' Angela snapped. A silent lull dropped on the room - in which someone clashed their cutlery. The Major wasn't pleased.

'Picking up intruders,' the maid stammered at last. 'Giselle and the others were fishing at the RiverMouth and they discovered...'

"They discovered...?' prompted Angela.

'Intruders,' said the maid. "They wanted to keep them a surprise and deliver them to you at dinner, but since they aren't here yet...'

Angela glowered.'Since they aren't here yet, you'd better tell me now.'

The maid cringed. 'A girl and a man with a hide thick and green as alligator skin. They came gushing out of the RiverMouth, straight out of the rock face, as if they had been spat out of the centre of the world...'

Angela considered.'I want these people brought to me.'

'They are doing so, madam.'

'No one intrudes on my land without my knowing. Even blind as I am.'

'No, indeed, madam.'

All the hairless bears were looking along the bright and spotless tablecloth at Major Angela now. She was rapt and clearly elsewhere.

'Not even those birds that roost in our rafters,' she hissed.'Even those birds belong to me.'

***

It was to those very birds, in their parliament in the canopy of the forest, that the Doctor was, at that very moment, giving an account of the various megalomaniacs he had happened across.

'What I don't understand is this business of stamping your will on everything,' he said, digressing from his tale, which had been about how he was sent to avert the very genesis of the dreams and desires of one particular historical despot. 'So that everything becomes the same as you - and then what do you have? Everything being the same. Unhappy homogeneity. Dullness.'

'It's like Narcissus, though,' mused Iris. 'So in love with the image of himself, that the image replaces all else until nothing remains but the beloved - himself. It's the terrible, deathly romance of yourself.'

The wren in command of the birds piped up. 'Your narrative has ceased moving.'

'Ha!'cried the Doctor.'All this constant onflowing garrulous non-stop motion. You're insatiable! Where was I? Ah, now. I was holding the two wires, if you remember, and by touching the two together I would trigger the explosion that would destroy the incubation chamber containing the creatures that would one day become my deadliest foes. Now Sarah Jane says to me -'

'What a lovely girl she was,' Iris put in.

'Indeed. So she says to me -'

'What's she doing now?'

The leader of the birds turned to Iris and said in a sudden, shrill, tone to one of his lieutenants,'Peck out her eyes.'

'What?' said the Doctor, aghast, as the eagles ruffled and stirred themselves to do as bidden. 'If you so much as touch my friend, then I can't go on with my story. With any of them.'

'You must!' shrilled the wren.

'I certainly will not.'

'She is an irritating woman.'

'I know that, but she's also my friend.'

'You are suggesting that we spare her, so you will tell us more of your tales?'

Already, to Iris's disgruntlement, the birds had decided after all that they preferred the Doctor's stories to hers.

'That is correct,' said the Doctor decisively.

'Perhaps I will have the eyes of you both pecked out,' mused the wren. 'And your livers plucked out, and -'

The Doctor flung up both his hands.'Wait!'

All the birds - who had become rather excitable at the sound of their leader's bloodthirstiness - eyed him beadily.

'I have much more to tell you,' he said hastily, frantically bargaining. He ran his fingers through his hair and gabbled.'Have I mentioned the vicious slime-like beast in the pit that only I could befriend and talk to?

Or when I was forced to battle a multi-legged fiend that secreted acid from every pore in an arena watched by some million or more? Or the world at the edge of the cosmos where I fell into a puddle and met the last known and very strangest creature in the world? Or when I went to the centre of the world and met people for whom time had stood still? Or the demon who lived under a church and unleashed himself one sacred night when -'

'Enough!' cried the wren. 'We believe you may divert us further, Doctor, with your follies.With your tales of made-up adventure.'

'Made-up!' he said hotly.

'You will eat with us and rest. Then you will resume your tale-telling

through this night. Take advantage of your time to rest, Doctor.'

The air was filled with busyness and feathers then, as the birds went off to prepare for the feast. The Doctor and Iris were left to wait where they stood. As she looked at him, they heard the distant squeals of their one-time cellmates being stuck and made ready for the pot. 'Made-up adventures,' he muttered. She smirked.'See how you like it.'

'All of mine are true!'

'It's all relative!' she shrugged.'Listen, I've been thinking. We should take advantage of this pause.'

They looked around the wooden council chamber. They had been left without guards. They were on a small podium and all about them was empty air. They couldn't even see the ground from here. The birds' city was one, quite naturally, with very few floors and, equally naturally, their prisoners weren't likely to go running anywhere.

'Good job we don't get vertigo,' the Doctor grinned. Then he sneezed again, and grabbed Iris's elbows for support. She tutted.

'So I've been thinking,' she went on.'It's only your stories that they're interested in, apparently. They seemed to go off mine.Why don't I... escape.'

'And leave me to face the music?' She nodded. 'I think that's a rotten idea.Why can't we both escape?' The Doctor was used to being the one giving out the orders and making up the plans.

'Because they'll realise we've gone and they'll all come flying after us. No - if I go, they won't give a monkey's. They'll be happy listening to you, being the wonderful raconteur.' He sighed deeply. 'Look,' she said. 'I'll go back to the bus, drive back and rescue you...' He raised an eyebrow.'I will!'

He remembered their rows about bow she had abandoned Gila and Sam. He was sure she wouldn't waste time on rescuing him. For some reason Iris wasn't letting anyone or anything stand in her way. She was intent upon some other goal. This still had the Doctor perplexed and for the moment he couldn't see any other way but to give in to her. 'So help me escape,' she prompted. 'And you will come back for me?'

'Girl Guides' honour.'

He rolled his eyes. Then he pointed out the thing that she was sure he would have noticed. He'd always been such a dab hand at finding escape routes - a skill she had never picked up. He nodded at a hole in the rough timbers way above their heads. 'The only way is up,' he smiled. 'Up into that black hole in the rafters, out on to this roof, and then down along the branches. I hope you're a good climber.'

'I can climb,' she said grimly. 'Maybe not as well as Greta Garbo, but good enough.' Then she started off. 'Iris,' he said.

'What?' Even though she was getting her own way, she looked cross. She made ready to jump from this platform to the next, and then to haul herself into the rafters, up to her escape route. He was looking at her. 'What?' she asked, more softly this time. 'I don't know what it is that you're up to...'

'Don't ask.'

'I won't. But whatever it is, I wish I knew why it meant you can't confide in old friends. Why you have to leave them by the roadside like this.Why it's made you so... ruthless.' She shrugged. "Times are tough.'

Then she leaned forward and placed a quick, audacious kiss on his smooth, pale cheek.'See you later, sweetie.'

He watched as she, with surprising grace and agility, dragged her aged bulk up into the rafters and to freedom beyond.

***

'I think,' said Gila as they trod wearily through ankle-deep leaf mulch,'I think this means that we're close to our objective.' His scaled shoulders were slumped as he walked along, ahead of Sam. Evidently it was some blow to his alligatorish ego to give in so easily to capture. He was trying to make himself feel better by saying that this capture, this being marched through the dark forest towards the home of'the Major', was all to their good.

Sam agreed. She also couldn't see any other way of carrying on at this point. The pink and grey, almost hairless bears were immensely powerful, gruesome-looking creatures. They carried scimitars and

golden axes. They thrust aside the overhanging branches and vines with a careless ease. She shuddered at the memory of how, once she and Gila had dropped clear out of the RiverMouth, the bears had plucked them out of the water as neatly as if they had been hunting trout. She could still feel those cold talons of theirs tearing through her clothes, nicking her skin, as they hoisted her on to the wet rock of the bank.

"This Major they've been talking about... are you sure it's the woman we're looking for?'

Gila gave a wry smile.'Oh yes. Angela used to call herself Major Angela back in the old days. By the sounds of it, she's busy here living out all her dreams of having her own little realm. And her own private army.'

The forest petered out soon after this and they had to follow a ledge down a crumbling cliff face, slipping along single file. Sam thought that the soft brown rock looked just like Jamaican ginger cake. Below them, hundreds of acres of woodlands were steaming lushly.You could lose yourself in that mess for the rest of your life. When they paused for a moment - the bears were fussing about something in their strange, mumbling dialect - Gila seized her arm and pointed out a building deep in the forest below them. A whitewashed colonial mansion, it looked like to her. The kind of thing mad millionaires constructed on distant islands on Earth when they wanted to get away from it all. They resumed their shuffling gait down the mountainside.

After some minutes of quiet trekking there was a tremor from deep within the rock face. Pebbles rattled and bounced across their path. Sam looked at GUa and they stopped in their tracks. The bears let out one simultaneous bellow of panic. Then a gout of red flame spurted out of the rocks ahead of them. It rose and bloomed magnificently, lighting up the darkening stormy sky, and then it shrank back, almost as quickly, almost coquettishly, into the black hillside. Its noise had momentarily deafened them all. Then the leader of the hairless bears, Giselle, barked out her rough commands that they should press on quickly.

As they did so the rock underfoot was blistering hot.

There was another brief and deadly expulsion of flame behind them, back up the trail where they'd already been.

'What is it?' Sam asked as they hurried, the procession losing all of its bizarre dignity by now. She wasn't given an answer. They had only a few

hundred yards downwards to go before they hit the woods again. In those few, perilously steep yards, however, there was a great rent in the rock and the flames rushed out like a hand to claim Giselle and only Giselle. She vanished in a single incandescent howl. The flame retreated, swallowed in one gulp again by the rock, and Giselle's black, broken remains fell with a ghastly clatter. The remaining bears howled and dragged Sam and Gila at full pelt into the cover of the trees.

They plunged into the forest's oily, crepuscular dark and carried on running. The bears kept up their panicked and brutish hullabaloo until they came to the white mansion in the clearing.

On the wooden veranda, a rifle slung expertly over her shoulder, stood the blind, bearded Major in her white uniform. She was waiting for them to come out into the open of her cultivated lawn.

'Giselle! Giselle is dead!' howled the bears.

Angela hefted her rifle.'Giselle?'

'The fire from the hillside claimed her! She is gone!'

For only the briefest moment the Bearded Lady looked stricken. Giselle had been the oldest and most loyal of her accomplices. Then her expression hardened. 'Who have you got with you?' Her eyes were sightless, but she could sense things, as the bears already knew. She motioned for Gila and Sam to be brought before her.

Gila had regained his breath. Suddenly he was at his most daringly laconic. He executed a swift, sweeping bow on the neat green lawn. 'Major Angela,' he said graciously. 'We meet again.'

She cocked the rifle.'And who might you be?'

He straightened.'I'm Gila. You know me.'And then he stared straight into the milky blue opacity of her eyes and realised that she was blind as the moon.'Remember?'he asked, more gently.

She looked grim.'We'll have to see about that.'

'You can't have forgotten me.'

'It was all lies!' burst Sam.'You don't know her at all, do you?'

'It was true!' he spat.'She's forgotten everything. And she's blind."

'I remember everything,' cried Angela. 'And I remember a surly alligator man called Gila. Who's to say that you are he?'

'I am,' said Gila stolidly.

"This is a world of illusions,' she declared.'And that's why I'm glad the Scarlet Empress struck me blind. I won't be taken in by illusions.' Then she told the bears to put Gila and Sam into the museum of arms.

***

The Doctor was back on. They stood him on his podium and gathered again in the rafters. His throat was tight and raw with talking.

The wren commanded him again. 'Begin with the beast that gave poison off its skin.When you had to do battle with it in the arena.'

'Ahm,' said the Doctor, thinking back. 'Oh yes. It was in a kind of Ancient Rome, the heart of the Empire that had never collapsed and had instead developed transdimensional travel.'

The birds were flustered.'Too obscure. Explain!'

The Doctor shrugged. His tiredness was making him reckless.'listen, I've been thinking. Do you know anything about the morphology of the folk tale? No? Well, it's a human concept, a very twentieth<entury idea, expounded by a Russian called Vladimir Propp -'

'We still do not understand,' said the wren heavily, flexing her small talons.

'His idea was that any story can be reduced to thirty-four functions. Any tale I can possibly tell you is basically a variation on hundreds of others. All you need are lots of variables to fill up the space. And you get endlessly renewable stories. So what I'm thinking is... maybe I could give you a plan of the thirty-four stages in any story, and then a whole list of variables, hmm?'

'Go on.'

'The variables might be Sontarans, Aggedor, Zarbi, Sarah, Jo, Metebelis Three, Solos and so on. And then I could give you a whole lot of plot devices, such as building a hot-air balloon to escape, finding a ventilation shaft to shin up, sabotaging a computer in someone's control room with a display of confounding illogicality, or hypnotising a possessed lackey to discover an enemy's secrets. Then you could reassemble as many stories as you like, one after the other, and they would never have to be the same one twice. And then I need never be here! You just need to randomise all my elements, as if in a big... um, blender, and then I can slip away quietly!' He grinned. 'What do you think?'

There was a general kerfuffle of protest.

'But we like your voice,' said the wren.'It has about it a certain ring of authenticity, as if you have actually lived these ludicrous events which you describe. We want you to tell us everything personally.'

'I was afraid of that. But you see, I can't always be here. I'm a fly-by-night. The whole world is calling out to me. Listen! Fidelity has never exactly been my forte.'

'We want you here always, Doctor. We have decided.' The Doctor shook his head, dropping leaves out of his tangled curls. 'It's all very flattering, but -'

'But nothing. Continue with the tales.'

***

Below the parliament of birds, beneath their floorless city of twigs and clay, a small army was approaching. The Scarlet Guard of the Empress were orientating themselves by the glimmering lights of the lofty buildings in the trees.

Their captain nodded and called his troop to attention. He told his tattooed men to gather the driest wood they could find and amass it under the trees that supported the birds. He produced from his bag a small, silver tinder box.

"The Empress,' he said,'is becoming impatient.'

***

Iris watched the troops with mounting horror. She had only just managed to extricate herself from the trees and set herself down on relatively solid ground with great relief. These days she wasn't well enough to do as much climbing and romping about as this. This whole trip was taking too much out of her. She crouched in the undergrowth and watched the Scarlet Guard set their fires.

The smoke spiralled, plumed and began to plummet upward towards the city of the birds. She watched and held her breath. She didn't think there was anything she could do. Then she turned and ran into the forest, through the gloomy and lumpen vegetative forms that lurched and shook and tried to snag her back. She tried to home in on the bus, beating back her panic in an attempt to pick up the ship's psychic trace.

Then she saw it. Her bus waited patiently, as ever, in the same clearing where they had left it.

But there was someone on board, waiting for her. Or, rather, half a person was waiting for her.

By the time Iris had flung herself through the concertinaed doors, that person looked up from its business and stared at her out of ten blazing eyes, and gave a single mechanical blink. The intruder was strapping arms on to its own torso, making minute adjustments and listening with satisfaction to the hiss and spark of its myriad connections coming together.

Iris stared at this silvered, half-completed beast.

Out of a face in which only the essentials had been re-formed, a smokily androgynous voice addressed her. 'I am your quarry, Iris Wildthyme. I have elected to come to you. I am the Duchess, and I am at your service.'

The creature's mercurial hands spread out towards her in supplication.

***

The council chamber of the birds filled quite rapidly with dense and sulphurous smoke. They lifted from their perches and swarmed in the air, shrieking their alarm. The Doctor fell back forgotten, as they wheeled

and careered out of the blanketing smog.

'This is your doing!' he was raucously accused.

It was getting hotter. A whole wall cracked and blackened and fell away. It let the night stream in.

The birds dashed at the open space, making for the clearer air.

The city was on fire and the Doctor was left clinging to his podium, feet dangling over the gushing blackness. Out on a limb again. Someone was smoking them out.

Chapter Nineteen
They're All Weird Places

They were held in the round tower of the museum of arms. Glass cases displayed the most startling collection of knives and swords. In the half gloom they glinted and shone. Sam and Gila spent some time examining these weapons, until they grew restless and bored.

'Major Angela always fetishised weapons,' Gila said. 'When we operated as a troubleshooting team she would have daggers and scimitars secreted all over the place. Very handy in a fight, Angela. Once I saw her pull a stiletto out of her beard and dispatch a Corellian pirate.'

Sam shuddered. 'Apart from the obvious, I mean, her being blind and all, why didn't she recognise you?'

Gila slid down the wall to sit on the highly polished floor. 'She's playing it very carefully. Being stuck out here has made her paranoid, not surprisingly. And it's true, I could well be an illusion - a facsimile of her old accomplice, sent by the Scarlet Empress to bring her back to the city.'

Sam asked,'Why are you all so scared of the Scarlet Empress?'

'Who said we were?' he snapped. His teeth were sharp and wet with stringy spittle.

'The way you all jump to attention when you hear she's after you. The way you talk about her.'

'I'm not scared,' he said.

Then the round tower's door flew open and one of the bears announced to them that they were to have dinner in the presence of Major Angela.

'Maybe she's decided to believe in you,' said Sam.

'It takes more than that to win Angela's trust. We'll just have to be on our guard.'

***

Iris watched, rather dumbstruck, as the cyborg completed its swift, expert self-assembly. For a moment she was transfixed by a glimpse of its livid, pumping heart, secure in a golden chalice in its chest cavity. It was the one still-organic component she could see in the Duchess. Impulsively, she decided to make an appeal.

'You must help me.'

'I have placed myself at your service,' said the cyborg, standing and steadying itself in the gangway of the bus.

'I want you to help me rescue the Doctor from the birds and the Scarlet Guard.'

'Show me,' said the Duchess curtly and led the way out of the bus. It - she? - smelled faintly of oil and of something left too long in the fridge.

***

Angela was stroking her luxurious beard, her senses aware of one of the bears as it ladled out a rich and steaming broth into golden bowls. Sam was ravenous. She ate hungrily, and listened to the one-time partners in crime begin a wary, halting conversation.

'Everything has changed,' Angela was saying pensively. 'The whole world was changing, as it tends to, and I thought I could escape all that by coming here and making my mark.'

'And creating your own little empire,' teased Gila.

'Why not? It's worked very well.'

He shook his head. 'You've no idea what's going on in the outside world.'

'I know enough. I know that the Scarlet Empress is overreaching herself.'

'She won't rest until the whole world is hers.' Gila watched the Bearded Lady blindly toy with her dinner.

'She can't be allowed to have it all.'

'At last you're talking sense.' Angela looked grim. 'If the Empress becomes as powerful as she wants to,' said Gila,'you won't be allowed to

carry on here, in your own little kingdom of the bears, you know.'

'I know.'

Sam had finished with her broth by now.'So what's the plan? What are we going to do?'

When she looked at Major Angela, she suddenly saw a tired, oldish woman, well past her fighting years. She looked helpless.'What can we do? What are we? What were we ever, even in our prime?'Angela looked bitter.'A bunch of circus freaks.'

Gila said,'I've never heard you talk like that before.'

'IVe never felt like this before. Up till now I thought I was indestructible.'

'What's changed?' The alligator man's tone was oddly gentle.

Apart from being blind? Look at me, I'm useless.'

'Not that useless.'

'And it's you being here, too, Gila. You remind me how old, how plump, how self-satisfied I've grown.'

There was a pause.

'We've got no choice,' Gila said decisively.'We have to stand and fight. She's coming after us.'

Major Angela looked stricken.

Gila said, 'She's sent agents after us. To gather up our group of four and return us to Hyspero and the Scarlet Palace.'

'What agents?'

Gila nodded at Sam.'This one here. And two others, who are coming after us.'

Angela raised her sightless eyes to Sam.

***

At least, the Doctor thought as he clung to the steadiest still-unburning branch he could find, at least the birds had got away safely. He watched their city's canopy burn brightly in acrid plumes of orange. He didn't owe them a thing, of course, and he'd been their prisoner and treated none too carefully, but he was glad to see they hadn't come to any harm. Now, he thought, he had to concentrate on himself. He looked down at his feet, hanging limply above the dense and smoky dark. There were several hundred metres to fall. He'd break his neck if he let himself go. There was probably something in those capacious coat pockets of his to help with this kind of thing, but that would mean hanging by only one arm while he fished around with the other. The sinews in his shoulders were already aching and making the most disturbing crackling noises. He wasn't, unlike some of the previous Doctors, convinced of his own superhuman faculties. He wasn't superstrong or even particularly brave. Not always. Although he'd been in some pretty spectacular scraps in recent years. Jumping off an Ice Warrior ship over Central London. Scuba diving with Zygons. Causing havoc once again on Skaro. He must be a fairly adventurous soul all in all, he decided happily. Then he started to cough and his eyes were streaming.

***

Me again. Iris.

The Duchess was a funny old thing. I don't know why they called her that. But she was a fighting machine. I've never seen anything like it.We crouched in the undergrowth beneath the burning city of birds and she surveyed the Empress's soldiers like a real pro. 'A party of five,' the Duchess said to me, keeping her electronic voice low and intent.'They will be missed. The Empress will never get back their beautiful painted hides.'

Then she picked herself up and ran brilliantly into the clearing. The firelight danced on her glittering shell. It must have been the first thing those tattooed guards saw of her - that gleam and glare of her skin. They wouldn't have known anything about the attack. She lashed out, she flailed, she struck and she whirled into them. Her arms became dancing blades. In short, she slaughtered them. They died with barely a cry between them. I was thrilled and appalled. I was never one for violence - unlike the Doctor, of course, who seems to court it wherever he goes.

I came out of my hiding place, a handkerchief over my face. I tried not to look at the palpitating carnage strewn throughout the glade.'He's up there somewhere,' I told myself, and pointed into the crackly wreckage above, wondering how long we had before the whole blazing, twisted kit and caboodle came crashing down on to our heads.

The cyborg looked up. Her ten eyes lit up red.'I see him.'

Then she lifted easily, easily, into the murky air and vanished some distance above me.

I thought, What a useful companion she would make. I wondered if she could be persuaded to join me on my little perambulations through the vortex. But maybe not. She wasn't much of a conversationalist. It's not many people who could spend most of their time stuck aboard a double-decker bus with a taciturn, murderous cyborg.

I was feeling quite woozy by now. My usual symptoms setting in. By the time the Duchess streaked back down to the ground, with the battered and sooty Doctor clinging - as I learned later - to her back, I was unconscious and in a heap of my own among the remains of the Scarlet Guard.

When I came to, we were all enjoying the hospitality of Major Angela, the horrendously bearded lady of the forest.

***

Afterwards the Doctor could recall very little of their trip to the homestead of the bears. He was covered with soot, still coughing, and could do little but follow the cyborg as it swept through the woods, bearing the prostrate Iris in its arms. He followed dumbly, trying to catch up with himself. The Duchess seemed to know where she was going.

On the hillside they were met by the bears. Their shaven hides glistened with sweat; the heat from the fires was fierce even here. The bears' eyes were pinpricks of burning light.

'I knew you existed!' cried the Doctor happily, wearily. 'I knew you were true!'

Up here, though, on the unpredictable hillside where they had recently lost Giselle, the bears had no time for pleasantries. Rather roughly they

shepherded the Doctor, the Duchess and Iris along, through the rumbling gloom, to the whitewashed walls of the mansion below.

The leaden sky above them cracked in two. The forest shuddered at the lightning's touch and seemed to draw itself inward. Rain began dropping heavily, steadily, and the Doctor thought grimly that at least that would put out the fires. He imagined the birds in their ragged formation, fleeing their home. He barely registered the details of Angela's mansion as they were marched, dripping, indoors, across the wide waxed floorboards.

Sooty and wet, he was led straight to the dining room, where a stilted dinner party was just about ending.

'Sam Sam Sam Sam Sam!' he cried, astonished.

She whirled around in her high-back chair and flew to him. She hugged him hard, getting herself filthy.

'You abandoned me,' she told him, and looked up into his face, surprised at how haggard he looked. His expression was bleak, staring, as the bears brought the cyborg and the unconscious Iris into the room.

He managed a weak smile and told Sam,'You know I have every faith in you and your independence. Now.'And she glowered at him.'I do!' he said.'Besides, you were never in any great danger, were you?'

Before Sam could reply, Major Angela was up on her feet and barking orders, unsure what was going on. The maid at her elbow mumbled a swift description to her of the new arrivals. She straightened her plain white uniform and pulled the tablecloth and dishes on to the floor with one jerk and an almighty crash. 'Lay the old woman on the table,' she instructed.

'What's happening now?' Sam breathed, realising that she still hadn't let the Doctor go.

'It seems that Iris has just about completed her mission,' he said.'But there's something very wrong with her. She's ill.'

In the ghastly quavering shadows from the fire, Iris looked already dead. The flesh, it seemed, had dropped off her. She looked skeletal.

Gila studied her cautiously and looked up at the Duchess.'It's good to

see you again,' he muttered through clenched teeth, half believing himself.'What's the matter with her?'

The cyborg turned all its eyes on him and they blinked once, as if in recognition.

Major Angela stood by the Duchess for a moment, and with one crabbed hand touched the cool metal of her arm. The cyborg flinched. 'It's really true! We are being drawn together again, against our wills.'

The Doctor watched as the Duchess, Gila and the Bearded Lady stood together, each appalled at the others' presence. Angela asked, 'Is the Empress doing this so she can destroy us?'

The cyborg gave a curiously human shrug.

'This creature...'Angela gestured at Iris.''This creature is responsible for the situation. We should just do away with her now.' She reached into her white jacket, presumably for some weapon.

The Duchess slid out a restraining hand. 'No, Major. This woman is dying anyway. And she was operating on behalf of the Scarlet Empress, quite against her own will. Something we three have done many times, hi truth, this woman is no different to us.'

Major Angela was chewing her thumb, thinking furiously. 'We need some help.'

Gila laughed savagely.'And who will help us?'

The Doctor coughed politely. 'Maybe I could pitch in. I'm not unaccustomed to -'

The Bearded Lady sneered.'Who is this filthy beast?'

He frowned. 'Oh, nobody. A mere nothing. But I could have a stab at helping out, if you like.'

Gila touched Angela's arm and instinctively she brushed him off. 'It's true, Angela. He's quite resourceful, this Doctor. We would never have got here if he hadn't helped.'

The Major tossed her bearded head.'Does it occur to you that I never

wanted you here at all?"

'Well, you've got us here,' snapped Gila. 'We just have to make the best of it. Your nice little seclusion is over.'

'Why should he help us?'

'For my friend,' said the Doctor suddenly. 'For Iris. Because she isn't well and I think she's in trouble.'

They stood locked like this, staring at each other for some moments, until Sam burst out: 'Look, you all want the same thing. You're all enemies of the Scarlet Empress and she's hunting you all. Can't you work together?'

Major Angela turned on her heel. 'I must take some consultation on this.'

When she was gone they gathered around Iris, and the Doctor fussed over her, checking her heart rates and the regularity of her breathing.

'She looks terrible,' said Sam.

The Doctor looked at the Duchess. 'She needs her bus. You know where it is, don't you?'

The cyborg nodded once and turned to go. At the door the armed bears drew forward as if to block her way, but the Duchess strode on, unperturbed.

'Handy friend to have,' said Sam.

Gila grunted. I hate cyborgs. She's useful, and that's all.'

The Doctor was peering into Iris's waxen face. 'Come on, old girl. Don't leave me now.'

***

The bearded major believed in doing things correctly. Though the troops of the Scarlet Empress might be at her door, she would still insist on her guests retiring at a decent hour and getting a proper night's rest. She set the bears on them, to serve and chivvy them into obedience, ordered them to usher Gila and Sam to a suite of guest rooms that had been

made ready for them in a separate wing of the forest mansion. 'There's time enough in the morning to make some plans,' Major Angela said curtly and waved her hand.

Sam was exhausted and, at one level, only too ready to comply. At least they weren't being treated like prisoners any more. But she didn't want to leave the Doctor. He hovered, still worried, over the inert Iris. He looked up, as if catching an echo of Sam's thought. 'Go and sleep,' he said, in that particular tone that she knew better than to argue with.

'You should too.'

'Sleep is for -'

'Tortoises, I know. But you're a wreck, Doctor.'

"Thanks a lot.' He grinned ruefully.'Go to bed, Sam.'

'I think this is the weirdest place you've ever brought me.'

"They're all weird places,' he smiled.

Sam lingered in the grand doorway.

'Look,' he said. 'I promise. I'll wait till the Duchess returns with the bus, I'll get Iris aboard and then, honestly, I'll have a quick nap.'

Sam shrugged and went off upstairs.

The Doctor sighed and sat down heavily beside the table and Iris. In the warmth of the fire his mud- and soot-encrusted clothes had dried on him like a brittle armour. His hair was tangled and matted.

So this was a vigil. He was the one doing the watching and waiting this time and he wondered about the many times he had put his various companions in this position. He wasn't used to sitting round like this.

After some time he was rejoined by Major Angela, who felt her way into the room, bringing with her an object covered with a bright red damask cloth. She sat it on a side table and it rested there - a squat, heavy, covered object, about the size of a portable television. He was sure that wasn't what it was. She stood back, evidently waiting for the Doctor to ask what she had brought him. He was tired and impatient. He rubbed

his eyes and got crumbs of soot in both of them.

'Oww.'

'You are part of the mission this woman has been sent on,' said Angela at last, stroking her beard. She spoke rather coldly to the Doctor, as if repulsed by him.

'By default,' he said. 'I thought she needed looking after. She would hate to hear me say that.'

'Do you know what her mission is?'

"That she had to find you lot, reunite you, bring you all back to Hyspero. Beyond that, nothing.'

'I think I believe you,' said Angela.'I think you are too simple a man to lie very well.'

"Thank you very much. Do you know, I can't even lie straight in bed at night.'

'So you are merely this woman's assistant.'

He pursed his lips.'Yes, if you like.'

'I think,' said the bearded major,'that there was another aspect to this mission that the old woman never disclosed to you.'

The Doctor stared at Iris, her sunken cheeks, her closed and brightly lidded eyes, at her disarrayed home perm. 'Yes, I wouldn't be at all surprised.'

'She was coming after something I have in my possession.' The major gave a sudden gruff giggle that startled him. He thought, The poor old thing's off her rocker.'Do you want to see?'

He spread his grubby hands. 'Why not?' Then he straightened and walked over to her.

'Don't come too close.'

He towered over Major Angela and she wanted him at a safe distance

as, carefully, she reached out to the object on the side table and then, reverently, she took a hold of the crimson damask and drew it carefully away.

Underneath was a very thick glass jar. It was sealed and filled to the brim with a glaucous juice. A shape, distorted by the thickness of the glass, could be dimly discerned within.

The Doctor sighed, thinking for a moment. It's the brain of Morbius all over again, he thought.

'See?' the major gave her strange giggle once more.'Do you see it? Do you see what I stole from the palace of the Scarlet Empress, more than ten years ago?' Fascinated despite himself, the Doctor drew closer.'Keep back,' Angela warned, sensing him.

He stared at the misty unguents within the jar.

Something was moving in there. Wizened, foetus-like, curled up about itself as if in amniotic suspension. Yet it rocked back and forth and, all at once, he could swear that the creature was shuddering in mirth.

'This is my genie in a bottle,' hissed the major exultantly. 'My evil genius, my vizier, my queen, my everything. My property.'

The Doctor's throat was parched. 'Who have you got in there?'

Now he could see more clearly. The shrivelled revenant in the jar seemed to swim around to face him, still convulsed in its silent laughter. Now he could see the creased and seamed face of an impossibly old woman. Her eyes were sunken but brilliant, her tiny spindly arms clutched and modestly pressed in her ancient, wrinkled breasts.

He looked away.'Who is this?'

Major Angela laughed, as if in complete sympathy with her horrible property.'She is a queen. She is the very first Scarlet Empress.'

There was a crash then, from the vast main entrance hall of the major's homestead. They heard the noise of a belabouring engine and it shook them out of their reverie. The Doctor turned and hurried out of the dining room, in time to see Iris's double-decker bus being driven, large as life, into the pristine main hall. At the wheel, the cyborg Duchess solemnly

acknowledged him, and pulled the vehicle to a halt. 'Help me get her aboard,' he told the cyborg, and realised that he could still hear that tiny old queen's malevolent laughter, as if his head were the jar in which she was kept.

Chapter Twenty
Out of Body

This was me then, set loose from the hampered trappings of that old body, and the first thing I did was unravel or untravel our journey thus far. I wanted to go back and uncover our route, go back to Hyspero and see what the Scarlet Empress was up to. I wanted that insider's view and now, quite disembodied, while my feeble self tried to heal up on the bearded major's dining table, I saw that I had my chance.

I became... What? A bead of moisture on my own fevered, furrowed brow, pushed up through the opened pores and released into the air. A molecule, then, an atom, some random speck, an infinitesimal particle of my essence, that could climb into the ether and go exactly where it desired.

It wasn't my first out-of-body experience. I'm quite an old hand at experiences such as these.

Up I went. I looked down at the Doctor and breathed a sigh at his evident concern. I saw him being shown the stolen, earliest Empress in her jar. I saw the Major's insane relish at her prized possession. I saw the Duchess and the Doctor carry my poor body into my bus.

Then I climbed up through the roof of the house, shot up through the canopy of the Forest of Kestheven. I found a place in the steamy and turbid clouds and a safe spot in the eye of the storm. I hitched a ride over the mountains it took us so long to travel as corporeal beings.

Here I go, back, back through our journey.

This is what it's like to live without sensation.

It's no life, but it has its uses, this being too small, too insensate, to be true. I need to reduce myself to this tininess simply to find out what the Empress is playing at.

To cross the desert I join the molecules of a grub embedded in the rank flesh of a bird of prey as it wheels its way across the sky above the sands. I can feel the itching hunger of the grub and its insistent pleasure in its simple life is almost pure enough to make me succumb to the temptation of remaining like this, as a parasite for ever. The grub terrifies

me with its easy and thoroughly contented lifestyle and that happily symbiotic relationship with the scavenger bird.

I manage to pull myself free of them somewhere south of Hyspero, where I become various elements in order to smuggle myself through the city and into the Palace of the Empress. I become water again, a bead of perspiration, wine, piss, then silver worn on a nobleman's torque, straw, hair and finally flesh. I am a particle in the blue tattooed flesh of one of the Empress's trusted guards. I settle here, at one with his indecipherable skin, knowing that he is bound for an audience with Her Majesty this very evening.

And so I see her again in her throne room, only a matter of weeks since I was last here. Now I have returned provisionally, only partially, and I congratulate myself on my curious skill at earwigging.

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Let me tell you what she is like, the Scarlet Empress.

She has presence. The air here is stiff with majesty.

Simply because she has so much presence they have to keep her cooped up in court, in a jar. The Queen of Jam squats permanently in state. Her limbs are folded and unmanageable beneath her like a disused deck-chair. She needn't have a body at all. She could just be a head. But she radiates a fierce presence. And she is very sensitive. The slightest noise could shatter her eardrums. In her presence, her guards mutter and whisper everything to her and time moves very slowly.

In her throne room with its high ceilings and narrow-panelled walls, the lords and ladies in vivid, lacquered colours seem to flatten themselves to blend with the paintwork. As if to avoid her gaze these wary souls avert their eyes and try to make themselves part of the frescoes. But even the frescoes are afraid of the Empress.

The Empress is proud of her presence, her majesty; she is proud of who she is. And why shouldn't she be? The city of Hyspero, the wide world beyond, all of it is incontestably hers, she thinks. It has been shipped and mapped repeatedly by her Armada, her soldiers have tracked its more habitable zones. They have laid claim wherever she has sent them. Each carved-up and tenderly demarcated morsel of land, sea and sky is known to her. She has seen very little of her actual possession,

but has it, through reports, by heart. Her people - most notably her tattooed guard - bring her messages all twenty-one hours of the day. She gets it all on paper - or rather, vellum. Information on skin such as this lasts so much longer. And information is what she desires: facts, figures and personal impressions from trusted gatherers worldwide. From all this compacted, received wisdom she compiles her magisterial sense of the world. Poised in her jar, the Empress catalogues the reports of envoys and mentally ticks over the parameters of everything she rules. From this site of received wisdom she sets herself up to hypostatise a world. She has to make it all up in her head, but it is enough. Imagining it all from the facts she gets daily, she can legislate. Sometimes, she thinks, her physical removal from the world might make her rather brutal and capricious towards her subjects. But she tries not to let that thought bother her too much.

Behind the throne room there are three chambers once used for dancing. The Empress has had them cleared and suited to her own purposes, since dancing is no longer permitted her in the Scarlet Palace.

In the first room there is a yellow waxed floor and a glass roof and twelve painted doors, each at a separate o'clock. The Empress has herself wheeled here each afternoon and placed in the exact centre, where she is the hub. She has a tattooed guard open each of the twelve doors around the room's curving wall.

On castors come the Empress's dozen dresses. Of course, she no longer wears the frocks she abandoned when she took up residence in her massive, opalescent jar. In they come, though, worn by motorised mannequins with faces too blank to exert any kind of personality, let alone one that would eclipse her own. Frocks in a dozen colours, from salmon through saffron through tangerine to verdigris. Each has colossally hooped skirts so that they seem to hover, Dalek-like, as they sweep about the room in a graceful circle.

Of one accord the dresses hold hands or rather, clasp handless sleeve ends, as they encircle the Empress. And then they begin to dance, in a relentless, automated ring. The Empress indicates to her guards that they should leave her to watch the dance and then, alone, she revolves herself in her jar of thick unguents, gasping in pleasure at the gorgeous fabrics'of her dancing mannequins.

I watch this for a while, until my tattooed guard, whose flesh I have joined, is forced to leave. Fleetingly, then, as he returns to the throne

room, do I see the other two hidden chambers. Both of these rooms verify two separate rumours about what the Empress keeps sacrosanct. In one, the second room, is that circle of poles, each one surmounted by a severed head. Her council of bodiless viziers. As we pass by, their eyes are shut, as if they need to rest. The air is chill and dark and it stinks in here, of course. Look at the knobbly skeletal ends of spine that terminate just below their blackened throats.

In the third room - just as grisly,! suppose - are the flayed and gorgeous hides of all her dead tattooed guards. Each is individual and distinct, their markings wonderfully preserved. This Empress knows a lot about marking and curing, it seems. Each still holds the rough shape of a man, each stretched out on a frame or loom, all along the scarlet walls. Here and there you can still see fingers, nostrils, haired eyelids.

Then we are in the throne room and waiting, waiting until the Empress calls on us again. We are at her whim.

I wonder whether I'm really going to learn anything by being here. The Empress plays her cards very close to her withered chest. I think about pulling myself free of the flesh of this guard and taking myself back off to be with the others, in the Forest of Kestheven. Then, quite unexpectedly, she returns.

I feel my guard, the one I have joined, flinch as she wheels into the room. His flesh creeps and, because I have stuck myself to it, I creep too. All of the guards gather about her. We live in terror of her commands. At any time, I realise, she might desire any one of us more as an ornament than as a servant; more as a wall-hanging than a living man. Yet always she prefers us on display, so she can perpetually observe our markings. This is another way in which she can feel she has access to the many sights of Hyspero - we are tattooed with images of this world's manifold flora and fauna. Each guard, while inside the palace of Hyspero, is forced to carry out his duties quite naked, subdued before her avid gaze. The cloaks are left hanging outside this inner sanctum. How bright and blue we all look, gorgeous, against the red plush of these walls and floors. Together we make quite a display.

When she speaks, her voice comes from nowhere and everywhere. Quietly. Because I have such a partial view of all these proceedings I can't quite make out whether it is telepathy, or some kind of electronic broadcast, or what. At any rate, her smooth voice resonates from within the tall, stoppered jar.

'My viziers tell me that our friends have discovered their objective.'A murmuring among the tattooed men. "This whole affair has already cost us dearly. A number of my beautiful guards have been killed in that forest. The whole platoon.'

My guard speaks up, carefully. 'All of them, Empress?'

'All of them.' She sounds appalled. "Their skins are quite irrecoverable.'

Everyone acts as if this is the worst thing about it.

'That wicked little woman we sent out seems, against all of the odds, to have succeeded.'

I start at this. She's referring to me. But she doesn't know I'm here, I'm sure of it. For a second, however, that was almost like being discovered.

'So,' she says,'things draw to a head. We must have them intercepted. Successfully this time. My viziers seem to think that they will have to cross the sea. I can see they have a point. Alert my daughter, and have her prepare that ship of hers, the Kristeva. Tell her to set sail for the peninsula of Keld. Tell her to find this... ensemble and bring them back to me with all speed. And the rest of you can go straight into the forests. This time, I want that daughter of mine to do exactly as she is instructed.'

With that, the Empress took herself slowly off to the room of flayed skins.

The tattooed men set about their orders.

I decided that now was my moment to unstick my tiny self from the flesh of my guard, and return to the others.

It took some doing. When you attach yourself like that to another being, the flesh finds it tricky, after a little while, to find itself free once more.

I fled the palace, the city, and made my way over the desert, mountains and forests, back to the Doctor and the others. It was terribly tiring, transforming again and again. At my age, that amount of self-reinvention can wear a girl out.

I opened my eyes.

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'I suppose you've had a nice rest?' he asked me, his voice full of ironic concern. I sat up. It was morning. I was back aboard my bus.

The Doctor was immaculate. His grey cravat was neatly tied, his hair was swept back and lustrous. Not even the nap of his green velvet coat was disturbed. He'd been using the dark watch of the night to spruce himself up a little.

Meanwhile, I was a wreck.

***

I told him that I couldn't remember a single thing about getting here. The last thing in my head was our being in the parliament of birds in the canopy of the forest... and then maybe something about climbing down the burning branches of the trees as the branches were gobbled up by flames behind me... and clouds of smoke... and something maybe about an android, smooth and aloofly beautiful, its organic heart held dripping in a golden chalice.

'Well,' he said.'It's all been happening here while you had your nap.'

I struggled to sit up again. The Doctor is such a soft touch, sometimes. All I had to do was look a little more feeble than I actually was, and he was eating out of my hand. 'Um... shall we do that funny mind-melding thing and update each other by telepathy?'

The Doctor smiled uneasily, as if this was my way of making a move on him. He needn't have worried, though: I felt far too dishevelled for any such thing.

He came and stood by me, and we became silent, intense - and, in a flash, I saw everything that had gone on around poor old unconscious me. Angela, the bears, the tiny cackling woman in the jar. And I could feel the Doctor probing at me for answers. I let him know that I'd taken my psychic trip and partially smuggled myself off to spy on the Scarlet Empress.

Minutes later, when we disengaged, he looked grave. I was surprised that the first thing he mentioned wasn't my little astral trip.

'You're really very seriously ill, aren't you?'

I nodded. My mouth was suddenly dry. I asked him to go and put the kettle on. He did so, worriedly, and I called after him. 'It's this old body. I've been in it for too long. But you know how attached you can become. I just got used to the feel of her. I've run the poor old thing into the ground.'

He settled the pot on the little table and thoughtfully warmed his hands. He seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. Something else new about this Doctor. 'It's funny,' he said at last. 'How, in the end, you can decide you're quite fond of an earlier self.'

'Do they talk to you sometimes?' I'd wanted to ask him this for a while. Back home this would be seen as a rather tasteless question. Somewhat rude, probably blasphemous. On Gallifrey, regeneration is treated just as sex is on Earth.

'Well,' he said. 'Sometimes. Always knowing better than me. I'm known, among my predecessors, as the young chap. The new boy.' He looked at the teapot. ''The tea boy.'

'I can't say I'm looking forward to having this current self as an interiorised voice badgering the future me. She's quite a harridan, isn't she?' He grinned. 'When I become her, the next one I mean, you'll look out for her, won't you? And show her the ropes?'

'Of course. This illness of yours, will you shake it off when you regenerate?'

'I hope so.'

'What is it?'

'Oh...' I could feel myself turning evasive. 'I had high tea with a Draconian prince in his mansion keep in the mountains. For the sake of manners I took the challenge of eating raw, still-live Kaled mutant from the shell. A tiny, beautiful jade flesh. My own stupid fault. I should have known they would be poisonous.'

'And that's caused all this? There's nothing you can -'

I wondered how much to tell him. Suddenly I saw that he'd realised

something. His eyes went wide. Beautiful eyes.'She's going to cure you, isn't she?'

'Who?' I poured the tea, looking away.

'You've made a bargain with the Scarlet Empress. And you think she can cure you.'

'You're too quick, Doctor.'

'Iris, if you'd just come clean in the first place... I've been worried about you.'

'You? Worried about me?'

He bristled.'I'm a terrible worrier.'

'Hmm.Well, yes, that's the bargain.'

'She'll help you if you bring back these peculiar characters, Gila and Angela and so on.'

I nodded. 'It's all a bit of an ordeal.'

'And is it to do with that jar Angela showed me? That wizened old lady inside the jar?'

"That's the one.' Our voices were low and conspiratorial.

'Who is it, Iris?'

'It's her grandmother. Her great-great-great-grandmother, raised to the nth power. It's her ancestor, stolen from the vaults deep, deep beneath the Scarlet Palace.'

'I see.'

'And we have to get her back.'

'Major Angela won't like any of this.'

I tutted. "That woman's barking mad, by the sounds of it.'

'Perhaps.'

There was a loud rap on the doors of the bus then. Outside, Major Angela was waiting for us. She was in a crisp white uniform and the hairless bears were assembled all about her. 'I think she wants a word; the Doctor said.

Chapter Twenty-One
Something Like a Genie

Sam was sitting by the huge hearth in Angela's dining hall. She watched as the Doctor and Iris were led calmly into the room. Beside her Gila gave a grunt of surprise.

'She's up and about again,' he muttered.

Sam dashed over to them.'You're back,' she said to Iris, who gave her a rumpled grin.

'I always manage to get back somehow, dear.'

'You're as slippery as he is.' Sam nodded to the Doctor.

The Doctor glanced about warily, to the other end of the hall, where Angela was settling herself into a simple wooden throne.'Well, Sam,' he said.'What do you think? You've seen more of Major Angela than I have. What chance do we stand of getting through this intact?'

She shrugged. 'We stand a better one if someone activates the Duchess.' The cyborg stood motionless beside Gila, as if awaiting instructions. Somehow she knew, though, that the Duchess was a law unto herself.

'For the moment,' Iris said,'I think we're rather dependent on Angela's next move. I wouldn't fancy tackling those bears of hers in a fight;

The bearded major addressed them then, and the bears corralled the travellers so that they had to stand before her chair.

'My bears are telling me that our woodland estate has been tainted and ravaged by the presence of the Scarlet Guard.'

Iris took it upon herself to be spokesperson. 'I'm afraid that's our fault. They were chasing us. But only in order to come after you... and what you stole from the Empress a long time ago.'

Angela snorted. Her beard bristled. 'You speak with refreshing honesty, Ms Wildthyme.'

'Professor, actually,' Iris lied, with a broad wink at the Doctor. 'And I speak as I find.'

One of the bears, quivering with reverence, brought the large glass jar to the Bearded Lady then and set it upon her lap. She stroked the cool sides. The visitors and the bears stared at the indistinct shape of the creature within.

'You have ruined my solitude here,' Angela said.

'It was bound to happen,' spat Gila impatiently. 'She's out to capture and rule the whole world. You know that, Angela. She wants to map it and chart it and keep it one way for ever - her way. There won't be any place left for you to hide.'

'But you led her guards to me,' said Angela in a low, dangerous voice.

'You brought it on yourself!' Gila cried. 'If you hadn't stolen... that thing!'

'Thing!'Angela shouted,grasping the jar to her thickset body.

'Um,' the Doctor broke in. 'I don't think Gila means to sound so disrespectful.'

'Yes I bloody do,' he muttered.

For a second the Doctor was stymied, and then an idea struck him. 'Listen, listen, listen,' he burst, with a sudden wave of his arms.

Oh boy, Sam thought.

'Listen, Angela, you're in a bit of a hole here.You know you can't stay here, what with the Empress encroaching and all. And I know you're not one to run way from a confrontation...'

'True,' she purred, stroking beard and glass jar simultaneously.

'I think you have an opportunity approaching, an opportunity to prove your... valour.'

'Doctor,' she smiled.'Tell me what you're getting at.'

'You said that the person in the jar is your genie, your own friendly

spirit.Why don't we ask it what you should do now? Ask it. Should you stay here and fight - or should you come with us to fight the Scarlet Empress on her home turf?'

Major Angela looked delighted at this easy formulation of the Doctor's.

'What's all this fighting talk?' Sam hissed at him.

'Sometimes,' he replied, 'you have to talk to people in their own language.'

'Come on, Angela,' he jeered. 'Consult the genie in your jar.Why don't you let the cat out of its bag?'

Already the bears were shrinking back against the walls of the dining hall. The air had turned peculiarly flat and dull, as if clouds had rolled suddenly across the sky. 'You,' said Angela,'are a wise man, Doctor.'

Then she slid the flat glass lid off the jar.

Iris gave the Doctor a funny look. 'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Maybe,' he said.'But isn't it all fascinating?'

From the jar came a column of sulphurous yellow smoke. The room's lights dimmed and the bears set up a terrible noise of agitation.

The visitors stepped back hurriedly as the smoke poured out and a blaze of light occupied the space between them and Angela.

'It really is a genie,' Sam said.

'Something like it,' said the Doctor.

The light and the smoke began to coagulate. Angela gave a whoop of pure pleasure.

Within the golden yolky cloud, something was solidifying and taking form. The seething gaseousness drew back a little to reveal a rather short woman who was brushing herself down and surveying them with a guarded and somewhat suspicious gleam in her eyes.

In that moment of manifestation she had somehow gained a quite

elaborate golden robe and head-dress. Sam sniffed and realised that the air smelled of lemons and honeysuckle. The woman swept the headdress off her head, revealing light, honey-coloured curls, and gave an experimental cough.'Can you hear me?'

She shuddered like a wonky TV picture. It was as if she wasn't quite in the same room as everyone else.'Are you getting me?'

The Doctor took it upon himself to speak for them.'What may we call you?'

'I am the Empress,' she said.'You could say I was the first of the type.'

'Of course.' The Doctor executed a swift bow.

Iris had shuffled forward a little. 'Then it's all true? Everything the Scarlet Empress told me?'

The woman shrugged. She was a little devil-may-care, the Doctor thought, frowning. 'You mean the current Empress? I don't know what she's been telling you, dear.'

"That all the Empresses of old exist and live still, deep beneath the throne room of the palace, all in jars in the catacombs.'

The original Empress tossed her head.'All quite true. We're all down there, having our well-deserved rest. All my many daughters and I. Except me, of course. Kidnapped as I am. And forced to work, in my extreme old age.'

She looked pleased with herself, though, for someone who had been roped into slavery. She looked glad to be out and about like this. Her face was powdered white, her cheeks caked in rouge. Her eyes were so thick with mascara that they looked like they'd been poked in by a sooty finger. Her head-dress had now been set back on her head at a rather jaunty angle.

Iris muttered to the Doctor, 'This really is the planet of the fabulous old queens, isn't it?'

He gave her a sickly smile. Then he challenged Major Angela. 'What are you doing, keeping this poor old thing hostage?'

Angela's eyes flashed. The bears, overcoming their fear of the deity in their midst, bridled and made as if to take hold of him.

'Watch your mouth, Doctor,' the Bearded Lady warned.

'Ask her advice,' Gila put in. 'If that's why you called her up from the dead.' His clammy hands were itching. Never had he seen a genie of any kind before. Not in any of his escapades. The kabikaj didn't really count. He just knew that this Empress had the kind of power that could answer wishes and commands. He could tell this by her quite careless and insouciant manner.

To Iris, meanwhile, the woman from the jar seemed rather common. Now that the image had steadied and resolved itself, the Empress that Iris could make out had bubbled blonde hair - the very shade of vanilla ice cream. Her flesh was ample and very much on show. Even given the apparition's immense age (and Iris put the figure at ten thousand at a conservative estimate) there was still something extremely... suggestive about the woman. All the while, as she outstared her breathless audience, she was slowly wiggling her hips. Both hands were resting on those hips and there were jewels on her fingers that glittered like artillery. In her very person the earliest Empress distilled a certain provocative charm and a distinctly risque wit. She wore ropes of tiny pearls, they saw, each pearl no larger than a grain of rice.

'Well,' she said, in a purring, unctuous tone. 'How nice of you to call me up at last. I've been waiting for just the right chance to meet my public. And here you are.' She treated the Doctor to a raking, saucy leer, looking him up and down slowly as she batted her three-inch-long eyelashes.'Was that you who opened my jar?' He coughed. 'Ahm, actually... it was all of us.'

'It's so wonderful to be wanted,' she smiled, still concentrating on the Doctor. 'She isn't what I expected,' Iris whispered.

'Things never are, dear,' said the earliest Empress. She asked the Doctor, 'Do you always bring your mother along when you meet royalty?'

'Enough of this,' Major Angela barked gruffly. 'I've called you up, Majesty, for a very particular reason.'

The Empress rolled her eyes. 'People only ever call me up when they're in a fix.'

"These... brigands are here to steal you.'

The earliest Empress looked at the Doctor again, and then at Gila, who puffed out his glistening, lizardy chest and stared fiercely back.

'And you're trying to stop them? Honey, let me go. I'll submit to captors like these.'

'You,' said the Bearded Lady,'are my property.'

'You can't stand in the way of kidnappers like these.'

'She sounds like my gran,' said Sam.'After she's had a few.' Sam's raffish grandmother was an embarrassment to her family, who liked to think of themselves as quite right-on and enlightened. Sam got on rather well with her gran.

"They want,' said the furious Angela.'to take you back to Hyspero and back into the clutches of the current Scarlet Empress.'

"That silly girl,' sighed the old woman.'She's getting above herself. I'm not going back there. She's a monster. Why's she sent you to fetch me, sweetie?' she asked the Doctor. 'Why hasn't she sent out the usual tattooed muscle boys?'

Iris interposed herself. She was still a little wobbly on her pins, Sam noticed. 'I'm the leader of this expedition.'

'Good for you, honey.'

"The Scarlet Guard are pursuing us. Major Angela wanted to ask you if she should stay and fight or come with us.'

The earliest Empress thought briefly. 'If I was you, I'd go with them. And if there's any trouble... I'll be here to help.'

Then she shimmered once, expanded once more into a column of yellow fumes, and issued back into the jar, which sealed itself. The bears gave a collective sigh.

Major Angela had reached her own decision. Her bushy jaw was set with resolve.'If we return to Hyspero, we go my way.And we go by sea.'

"Then we have to travel down to the next level,' said Gila. 'It might give the Scarlet Guard the slip that way.'

'Why by sea?' asked Sam.

'There's someone we have to fetch; said Angela. Something dawned on Gila.'Oh, not him'

Angela nodded. "The fourth member of our company of old. We need him too, Gila.'

The alligator man groaned.

'We need transport, horses and furs. It's freezing on the next level down.'

Before the Doctor could ask what they were talking about, he heard Iris give a mournful grunt and he caught her as she sank backwards into his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Two
I've Had My Moments

When the bears decided that what they wanted most of all, more than anything, was to be human, there was the problem of what to do with all the fur. Major Angela was their example, their shining reason for wanting to be human beings, but she begged them not to do away with their golden hair. It was so lustrous and rich. She would have given anything for a beard of the same fine substance. This puzzled the bears, who wanted only to be her, in the way that medieval saints wanted to become Christlike. They wanted to be able to use knives and forks like she did. It was Giselle, the most trusted, Giselle who had recently died on the hillside, who suggested that they give all their golden clippings and curls to the Bearded Lady herself, in a kind of tribute.

She kept a room at the top of her mansion especially for the purpose. It was a golden room. Under the door crept a buttery golden light. Here the bales of golden fur were stacked and stored and, when it was decided that Major Angela was leading the party of fugitives to the sea, it was the door to this golden room that she flung open. She set the bears to weaving and creating cloaks and hoods from their own gleaming fur. She warned her bears that none of them would be coming with her on this next adventure. They were to stay and watch the beloved homestead against the Scarlet Guard. It was not a decision that she took very lightly. Major Angela had not been separated from her bears in a decade. The bears kicked up a dreadful fuss, but she was not to be deterred.

'We will not let you go,' warned her footman, looming over the Bearded Lady. This was in the doorway of the spectacular golden room. Once more she was forced to the conclusion that she was as much the bears' prisoner as their ruler. 'You promised that you would always be here, instructing us in your human ways.'

'If I leave alone, I will be able to come back sooner,' she insisted. 'I need to sort this mess out properly and I can't do that with an entourage.'

The footman was perplexed. Like any of the bears he was extremely short-sighted and this made him, quite naturally, bad tempered and gruffer than he meant to be. Angela stood right up close so that he could be sure she was still there. She knew that the world the bears saw was always twilit, their eyes were so bad. Not as bad as hers, of course. She knew they loved her because she had never been afraid to stand right

up close and face them. She had never been bothered by her bears' rank breath.

'You won't stop me,' she said.'Will you?'

'We don't have anything to do without you.'

'There's the house to keep up and keep safe.'

The bear grumbled.

Major Angela went off to think. This might be a problem.

She went to the kitchens, deep under the mansion. Here, two golden bears, sisters, had the run of this domain, and they were two of her trusted favourites. They were cooking tonight's broth. It took only a moment's diversion for Angela to pop into the pot a certain powerful sleeping draft. Something that wasn't very harmful, but strong enough to knock out a houseful of bears. She had kept it just in case, one day, she found herself having to creep away without their knowing.

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I could have told the Bearded Lady how difficult it sometimes is to relinquish power. Often, when I was Empress, millennia since, I wanted to dismantle the mechanics of power and just walk away and do my own thing. But oh, no. There are always lackeys and hangers-on, viziers and generals to hold you in place and uphold the state. Who'd be Empress?

How relieved I was when my day was done and they put me in the Tunnel, in the catacombs beneath the Scarlet Palace. I was the first banished underground at the end of my reign and through the centuries I have been joined and joined and joined again by my many daughters. All of them, too, have been pleased to give up supreme command of Hyspero. It is wearing, ruling a place such as this, we all agree. All save our current daughter, of course. Who, I fear, seeks to be Empress for ever.

So I do feel it is a good idea that we put our motley heads together -this little gang assembled about me now - and do something about her. I think my great-great-great-etcetera-granddaughter has grown into something of a fiend. And you'll appreciate my help, won't you, Doctor, honey?

Ah, he wasn't expecting that. He isn't used to voices out of nowhere. He jolts right out of his seat. He's on the front seat of Iris's double-decker bus. For a few idle moments he was watching the others carry supplies on board. He was staring abstractedly out of the smutty windowpanes at the pale-cream and icing-sugar walls of the Bearded Lady's mansion. He was thinking about decor, and about golden fur crammed into golden rooms and wondering how soon he will see his own - what's the word - TARDIS?

'Yes,' he snaps. 'TARDIS. My Ship. And what are you doing, rummaging around in my head?' Then he shakes those lovely, tousled curls as if - poor thing - he could thus dislodge me.

'Call it a little narratological sleight of hand, sweetheart,' I whisper. 'One of the perks of first-person narration, we could say. When I was the Scarlet Empress I was of course omnipotent and that is only a shade away from thinking yourself omniscient. And here I am, able - blithe and willing - to slip into your thoughts'

'Oh, it's you,' he says, restraining a scowl. 'Your Majesty does me honour with her presence.'

'Too right.You intrigue me, Doctor. Both you and Iris do.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' Now he's wondering where my actual, corporeal self might be.Where my stoppered jar has been left. I am stowed within the bearded major's fur cloak, as she stealthily prepares her escape from the bears. She switches off all the lights, blows out the candles and, feeling her accustomed route, tiptoes carefully, very carefully, between the dropped and snoring, pale forms of the bears. They sleep where they have fallen in their unceremonious heaps and she feels regret - I can tell - to run out on them this way. Major Angela is not a bad leader, in her own way. But she wants to be off. That old, roving, adventuring spirit is stirring within her, galvanised by her bizarre visitors. She feels only the slightest apprehension for her blindness. This will be her first real jaunt in the dark.

'You and Iris have been free all your lives to wander at will and embroil yourselves in anything you've wanted,' I tell the Doctor. 'You make me very envious. You've never been cooped up inside a jar. Or forced to wear the robes of great office.'

'You'd be surprised,' he says. 'I've had my moments. And I've had to work hard to be this free of responsibility, you know.'

'I think youVe been here before,' I say, suddenly realising that this is the truth. 'I've felt your presence on my world in the past.'

'I might have.' He is guarded.

'And only now you come to see me.' If I had a face just now it would look rueful. 'You naughty old thing.' Then I yank myself out of his mystifying, perplexing mind and visit the lower deck of the bus, where Sam, his young and rather loyal companion, is arguing with the old woman Iris about a wheelchair.

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It had been waiting for them, silver and resplendent black, in the gangway, when they boarded Iris's bus.

'I'm not getting into that,' Iris burst out. She seemed to be addressing the bus itself.

Sam saw the wheelchair and tried to placate her. 'It might be a good idea. You could conserve your strength for a while.'

The old woman rounded on her.'Why is it everyone suddenly knows what's best for me? What is it that happens when someone gets ill? Have I lost all my faculties?'

'No, of course not.'

'All this is getting out of hand. This was my plan, my expedition. Everyone is taking over.'

'All I said,' said Sam, keeping a level tone,'was that it might rest you a bit if you used the chair.'

'Sam, last night I astral-projected myself halfway across this whole world.'

'I know,' murmured Sam, although this was the first she'd heard of it. Iris scrutinised her face for signs she was being humoured. Then she let out a great sigh and flung herself down in the wheelchair.'Oh, what the hell. I

don't know who I'm fighting any more. You're a good girl, Sam. You can push me around.'

The doors of the bus flew open and Gila appeared, weighed down with immense and shaggily golden fur coats. Iris's eyes lit up. 'Well, they're fantastic.'

Gila rolled his eyes and was followed aboard by the Duchess, who was similarly encumbered.

'At least we get fabulous outfits for this part of the trip,' Iris smiled. "These put my old furs upstairs to shame:

The Duchess trained all ten eyes on her. They watched the cyborg drop the furs on to the couch, select one, and pull it carefully over her silver shoulders.

There was a thudding from the stairwell and the Doctor appeared.'Do you know, that odd little old woman from inside the jar has been fiddling about inside my mind?' He looked flustered.

'Lucky you,' grunted Gila, tugging on his own furs.

The Doctor seized a coat from the heap and looked pleased. Sam had noticed before the way he always enjoyed a chance to dress up. When they were all kitted out she said,'We're going to have trouble telling who's who.'

'Not a bad thing,' Gila said.

Still a bit miffed, Iris wheeled herself to the driver's cab, saying,'Let's get this whole shebang on the road.'

Major Angela stomped aboard in her own furs, clutching the jar to her chest. Already out of her familiar environment, she looked a little lost and had to be guided, by Sam, to a seat. The doors whooshed shut behind her.'We can go.' She looked worried and wan beneath the beard. T hate leaving all my lovely bears like this. I feel I've betrayed them.'

Sam looked out of the bus windows. From here you could see the slumbering creatures everywhere: face down in the hall, halfway up the gilded staircase, up on the landing. "They'll understand, Major Angela.'

Gruffly, Angela told Iris, 'Drive out of here as quietly as you can. I wouldn't want them waking until we're long gone.'

Iris tossed her head.'Drive quietly!' she snapped derisively and revved up the engine. The bus set up a ghastly, racking cough of a din as she instructed it to reverse through the tall, glossy double doors of the mansion.

Sam went to sit beside the Doctor. Inside his fur hood his grey eyes were gleaming with excitement.

'We've got quite a little team in tow,' he smiled.

Sam gritted her teeth until they were out of the hallway and on to the gravel drive. The tyres seemed to make an unearthly racket as they headed for the road. Everyone, it turned out, held their breath until they were out of sight of the buildings, tearing they might wake the bears and see them in pursuit. But inside the homestead, nothing was stirring.

Iris got them on to the road at the back of the estate and accelerated swiftly into the forest. Major Angela shuffled down the gangway and bent close to give her directions.

The forest's sepulchral air swallowed up the bus and they plunged onward, into the south.

Sam thought about school trips and starting out in the bus, full of eagerness every time, even if they were going somewhere educational. 'Hey Iris,' she yelled.'Put that Motown tape on again.'

'Righty-oh,' Iris called, and Diana Ross came on, surprising all the Hysperon natives on board.

Somehow things seemed much better now they were all back on the road.

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Where the thorns and thickets grew their densest and the vines swung down to impede the primitive roads, the gateway to the next level was waiting for them. As she gave them half-remembered directions to the gateway, the Bearded Lady grew quite philosophical about this. 'We are coming to the southernmost limit of my domain. I haven't been this far in

a decade. Haven't you ever noticed,' she called back to the Doctor, 'that the one place you want to go is that most shrouded in mystery and the most hazardous to get to?'

'Oh yes,' he agreed happily.

Iris thought that Angela had taken too much of a shine to the Doctor. She must like the sound of his voice. 'So what is the danger here?' the old woman asked. She drew the bus to a halt. The road had become completely overgrown. 'What can we expect?'

'If this is indeed where the gateway to the next level is,' said Major Angela,'then we can expect it to be guarded by a beast.'

'We should have guessed,' scowled Gila.

They clambered out of the bus. Very little light penetrated the mesh of branches above them.

'Where is this beast?' asked the Duchess flatly.'I will destroy it.' Major Angela was scandalised. 'Surely you recall that you can't possibly kill the beasts who guard the gateways? They are all that maintain the discrete barriers between levels.'

'Well, where is it?' Sam snapped. 'All I can see are a few old trees.'

'Within the trees, in the darkest, dingiest part you can uncover,' said the Bearded Lady. "That is where you must go to ask to permission to pass through.'

'Like trolls,' said the Doctor. 'In the old Nordic tales, guarding bridges: "They don't have trolls here,' Iris called from her wheelchair in the doorway of the bus.

'Well, whatever,' said the Doctor. 'I'll just pop in and ask if we may pass.' He plunged recklessly into the bushes, then pulled back. 'What kind of beast is it I'm likely to come across?'

'A gigantic and malign spider,' said Angela.

He froze.'Oh. Really?'

'You don't like spiders,' Gila smirked.

'Not much.' The Doctor looked abashed.'Sam, would you come with me, please?'

Sam shouldered forward, secretly flattered.

The others watched them slip into the trees. The undergrowth whipped and flailed at them. Major Angela suggested that they start to cut away some of the jungle vines to find the gateway itself. It had been years since anyone had passed through this way.

They set to work.

***

In the murky light of the space beyond the trees the Doctor and Sam were casting about and keeping a careful eye out

'Come on, Doctor.You're the best at walking straight into monsters. Even when you don't want to.'

He gave a little shudder.'I have a thing about spiders,you know. Did I ever tell you about the time I had to go into the cave of the Great One?'

'I think so.'

'On Metebelis Three. Strange place. Everything was a kind of Habitat blue. This was all several lifetimes ago and a complete nightmare.'

'Shh.' Sam stopped in her tracks.'I thought I heard something.'

The Doctor crashed blithely on, cracking and bending wet branches as he reminisced. 'Oh yes, I came out of it almost dead, but I saw the queen of the giant spiders. Dreadful squeaky voice. They were a terrible lot. Iris claims to have done exactly the same thing, though apparently that time it was her and her glamorous companion Timmy who -'

Sam swore.

The Doctor wheeled around. 'Sam, I'd much prefer it if you simply screamed blue murder rather than use language like -'

The spider in front of them was taller than the two of them together. It lay

casually, almost luxuriously, in an opaque tangle of webbing, bathed in orange light. Its eyes glittered and all eight of its legs tapped eagerly, as if waiting for their explanation.

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They had pulled aside curtain after curtain of twisted overgrowth and undergrowth. At last they had found stone underneath. An archway stretched over the road, almost completely clogged with rank life. A sandstone door barred their way. The Duchess and Gila worked steadily to reveal a host of runic symbols gouged into the soft rock, as if by someone's nails.

'What's the password?' Gila asked, as they rested to admire their handiwork.

'Usually,' Major Angela said, feeling the inscribed text with her fingers, 'you have to pay a toll.'

'A toll?' asked Iris suspiciously.

'You feed your most expendable companions to the spider.'

***

The creature's voice seemed to be coming from many places at once.

'You bears never come this far south,' it ruminated.

Sam elbowed the Doctor. They both clutched their furs tighter and shrank into them.

'It thinks we're bears,' Sam hissed.

'Were-bears?' asked the Doctor, looking round.

'I wonder if you could tell me why you are here; said the spider languorously, lying back on its soft hammock. It had a very diffident tone.

'We are here...' began the Doctor, attempting to sound gruff and bearlike,'We are here to find out how we may descend to the next level. Through your... um, charming gateway.'

'I see.' The creature flexed a couple of hairy, wrist-thick legs. 'Perhaps you already know, then, that I guard the interstices between the levels. It is my function to prevent traffic. Especially - forgive me - by bears.'

'I know,' said the Doctor winningly. 'But we can make it worth your while, you see.'

'I thought that you bears shaved yourselves these days,' the spider said, becoming suspicious.'Aren't you two terribly hairy?'

Sam put in,'We're not ones to follow the crowd.'

'All the bears want to be human.' The spider said it like a curse.

'We don't want to be like that,' said Sam.

'Hmm.'

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The spider was putting on a good show of seeming bored. Actually, she was thrilled to have company. She considered roping the two of them into her web and forcing them to talk for ever. Her paralysing sting would keep them alive indefinitely, immobile but free for conversation. And she need liquefy and devour them only very gradually. There wasn't much else in the way of conversation to be had here. She rather enjoyed speaking with her irregular victims.

'How long have you been guarding this gateway?' asked the Doctor in a conciliatory tone.

'Ages.'

'You look tired of the work. It's hardly a demanding job.'

The spider's mirror ball eyes swivelled.'What do you mean?'

'For someone of your undoubted talents.' The massive legs twitched.'It doesn't exactly stretch me.'

'Why don't you come with us?' asked the Time Lord impulsively.

'What?' Sam nudged him hard.

'And where would I be coming with you to?'

The Doctor gabbled excitedly. 'Tell me who put you here. Who is responsible for the mind-numbing tedium of your position?'

'Well,' said the spider. "The Empress, of course. It is she who maintains the discrete barriers between her nether regions.'

'Quite,' said the Doctor. 'And we are on our way to confront that Empress.We think she's got above herself.'

'My treatment has been appalling,' said the spider restlessly. 'Sometimes I even think she has forgotten about me.' "Then open the gateway! Come with us!'

'And this is how you will make it worth my while?'

'Of course!' beamed the Doctor. 'A little light revolution! What more could you want?'

'I could, of course, just ensnare and devour you,'

'You don't want to do that.'

'Don't I?'

'Oh, no.' The Doctor was still grinning like an idiot.

'You are no bear.'

'Actually, no.'

'Hmm. I shall have to think.'

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his and the others had become impatient. She sat in the doorway of the bus, and listened to the forest noises for a while. She had a tape somewhere with the same creaking, cawing, shushing and rustling noises and it was meant to be gently soporific. One of her companions, Gary, had bought it for her, but woodland noises just gave her the creeps.

She returned her attention to the tedious job in hand and told Gila and the Duchess which portions of the stone doorway to push and probe. She racked her brains to come up with the words to open it. 'Open sesame' was on the tip of her tongue, but she was too embarrassed to actually try it. She wanted to hit upon the correct Gandalf-like combination of phrases. She was sure there must be one. Not for the first time she wished she was the type who could produce the exact answer in a flourish of flamboyant erudition.

The Bearded Lady was soon furious.'Where has that dithering fool got to?'She stroked her beard quite roughly.'How long does it take to speak to a spider?'

Iris shrugged. She didn't think much of Major Angela. Trumped-up nouveau riche, she seemed to her. Pretend gentry. All guts and glory. Not Iris's type at all, and not her usual class of travelling companion. She sighed as they watched Gila wedge his jade bulk against the solid stone of the gateway. Iris marvelled at the alligator man's muscles. He seemed suddenly squatter and more powerful than ever. Muscles stood out on his back so that there appeared to be a solid ridge there.

'Perhaps we should go back,' said Iris. 'If the Scarlet Guard are searching for us, maybe we should give in and just go with them. They're heading in our direction - back to Hyspero.Why run away?'

The Bearded Lady came over all gung-ho. 'What? Give ourselves up? To that tattooed scum?'

Iris tutted. Gila had warned her what Angela could be like. 'I don't mean surrender, exactly. I mean, we've got what we came for.'

The Bearded Lady looked bitter. 'My Empress. My possession.'

'Well, yes. Exactly. We could just head back now...'

'Never,' snapped Angela.'Our party is not complete yet. We need one other. We can't return to Hyspero with our tails between our legs. I won't allow that. We go back at full strength, with vengeance in our hearts, or not at all.'

'Vengeance,' muttered Iris sarcastically. She had never been given to such things. Her style had more to do with getting out of things

unscathed. Looking out for number one was her bottom line and she found it easier not to keep too many principles. You only lose them in the end, she thought. She was about to deliver Angela a lecture in this vein when the dense wall of foliage parted suddenly and the Doctor re-emerged with a triumphant look about him. A slightly less enchanted-looking Sam was in tow and behind them came the worst spider that Iris had ever seen. It was purple and black, with a vile head twisting in the feeble sunlight. It was almost half the size of her bus. She held in a squawk of dismay at the sight of the thing.

'What's happening?' asked the frustrated Angela, and Iris quickly filled her in. 'We didn't say befriend the bloody thing, Doctor,' she cursed. Then she had a savage silver dagger in one hand. 'We said get that gateway open.'

He hurried over. 'Angela, Angela, Angela! The spider has agreed to accompany us.' He gave a low bow in the creature's direction. 'Would you like to do the honours?' he asked.

As the spider stretched out its legs and hauled its oily bulk across the road to the stone arch, Sam could only think of minor celebrities opening supermarkets and cutting taut ribbons on the doorstep. The spider lowered itself before the arch and the others drew back. Gila and the Duchess went rather reluctantly, staring up at the coarsely haired thorax of the guardian. The spider set to work, tracing various indented nines with the sensitive undersides of its legs.

'It's really going to open for us,' breathed Iris. She wheeled around and hauled herself out of the chair, back into the driver's cab. 'Everyone, get in!'

'Diplomacy!' the Doctor congratulated himself.'What am I?'

'A genius,' Sam told him.

The stone archway was suffused with sapphire light. It was molten, cracking apart the sandstone chunk by chunk, opening hairline cracks and jamming them further apart so that the stone seemed to dissolve into dust, melting like sugar in tea. The ice-bright light burned into their eyes as they stared out from the bus. Burned into their retinas - even Major Angela's - was the afterimage of the spider, suspended and frozen in massive silhouette.

Then the terrible glare died. The way was clear.

The spider dropped on to all eights and appeared to regain its thin, reedy breath. It turned to give an oddly human, beckoning gesture for them all to follow it through the archway.

Iris clamped her hat down on her head and gunned the engine.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Going Down

They were inside the confined chrome-plated space of a lift. The walls threw back alarming distorted versions of themselves, the spider and the bus as the doors shunted closed behind them. They could see their faces stretched in surprise, repeated and repeated in the oily metal. The lift was only just big enough.

Then there came the clunking and thrashing of ancient machinery as, above and beneath the metal box, vast linked chains shouldered their weight and braced themselves to operate. The slick floor beneath the tyres of the bus and the spider's sensitively haired legs shuddered and lurched and everyone aboard felt the unmistakable sagging, dragging sensation of the elevator beginning its descent. The spider clutched itself to the sides of Iris's vehicle, its stomach being by for the least resistant of them all.

'I never expected this,' Sam said, as the bus lights flickered and dimmed, as if startled.

'It's like being in a department store; said the Doctor delightedly.

'I'm only glad there was room enough,' Iris sighed, 'for a whole bus and a giant spider.'

'It's mad, though,' said Sam, staring out of the panes of dirty glass at the spider, squashing its ample body and spindly legs against the exterior hull of the bus. Those dark eyes stared back at her and she tried not to think of them as malevolent. The spider's head quivered and its tiny mouth worked and Sam turned away as a gush of livid vomit spurted and slid down the windows.

She turned to Gila, who was chuckling at the spider's discomfort.'So this whole planet is on different levels and connected by lift shafts?'

'Among other things,' the alligator man told her. 'We're lucky. Other places you have to run and jump between levels.'

'This place gets worse.'

They watched in silence, tense and bracing themselves, as the lights

continued to wobble and strobe, and the interior of Iris's ship and its freight of oddments shook. 'You should nail everything down,' the Doctor told her.'Or get your dimensional stabilisers looked at.'

She tutted.

Major Angela, blind and unimpressed by the strange new environment, seemed to be fretting still about leaving behind her bears. She wasn't the type of girl, she told herself, to get all sentimental, but nevertheless she clutched her golden furs to her and stroked them.

The Duchess gleamed and whirred and seemed stoically fascinated by the new turn of events.'How deep are we going?' she asked, matter-of-factly.

"That cyborg,' Sam hissed at the Doctor, 'has a habit of making everything sound as if it doesn't matter.'

The Duchess overheard this.'It doesn't; she said, startling Sam.'I cannot be damaged, you see. Nothing can impinge upon me and so, in a very real sense, nothing matters to me. This exoskeleton protects the only mortal, fleshly part of me. If I sound uninvolved to you, to your mortal ears, that is the reason why. I live through everything at a certain remove.'

'You're lucky,' the Bearded Lady said.

'I would give a great deal,' said the Duchess solemnly, 'to feel endangered. To wear flesh on the outside once more.You do not know how precious that is.'

The Doctor sighed. 'I don't think I've ever met a semi-cybernetic individual who was entirely happy.'

Iris said, 'Did you ever meet my friend Kroton? He was a Cyberman whose kill-kill-kill-enslave-destroy function had never quite kicked in. Now hewas a poor, tortured soul. Lovely boy, though.'

There was a resounding crash of old chains and the bus suddenly jolted them off their feet. They steadied themselves.

'I think we've made it,' Gila whispered.

Then they jumped as one of the spider's legs rapped gently at the window nearest Angela. Its voice came sibilantly, filling the interior of the bus. 'This is our stop,' said the spider.

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Now we could see why we needed these heavy old golden furs. I was already very attached to mine.When this whole escapade was over with I was going to make sure that this furry little number was finding its way into my wardrobe on the top deck of the bus, along with my other costumes, trophies, treasures and diaries. Oh, that's if we ever get off Hyspero.

The heavy Art Deco doors groaned open arthritically. we watched the spider twist and unfurl its elegant self out of confinement.

It led the way out on to the new level.

Gone were the trees, the musty heat of the woodlands of Kestheven. Everything had changed. How would I sum up the next leg of our journey? How would I account for those next few days?

Ice, ice, ice. Ice floes, ice fields, bergs and glaciers, shifting perilous tectonic slabs of pearly grey, violet, indigo, purest aquamarine with odd briny life-forms frozen and perplexed within sculpted blocks of ice. Verdant green ice, even, for the oldest ice, the ice that had remained unthawed, unflawed for millennia. In the ice fields you could start to see how old Hyspero really was. Its history was frozen before your eyes. Maybe it was a whole week we spent trekking out to our next rendezvous. I never realised till then, till our sojourn in the frozen wastes of Inner Hyspero, that winter came in so many colours.

All the while the keen wind hustled us along, making our collective eardrums whine and burn, as if somewhere out there, in all the snow, someone - perhaps the wolves we occasionally heard by night - were talking about us. Even aboard the bus those frigid winds got to us and we sat wadded up in our furs. Goodness knows how our human contingent was faring; I'm Gallifreyan through and through and even I couldn't feel my more extreme parts. I felt like I had snow inside my boots the whole time. My favourite compilation tape froze inside the machine and so we couldn't even drive with music. We tried tuning in to radio stations, but what we picked up was too weird and disturbing to listen to, so we left it off.

Each morning the Doctor trudged outside the bus to check out the lie of the land. He loved the wastes. I'd always suspected that he was, deep down, a chilly old soul. He had a penchant for Sartrean moments. The rest of us would be having breakfast, huddling round the gas fire and a fry-up. It was on this trip that I rediscovered my love of potato cakes, black pudding and deep-fried Christmas cake. And in came the Doctor from his latest arctic sortie, stomping clods of frost and snow off his shoes like Doctor Zhivago, pushing closed the doors against the freezing gales. His face was keen and hawklike every time, his eyes glittering.

'How's the spider?' I asked one morning, mumbling through a mouthful of mustardy sausage. Slowly I was getting my strength back.

'Oh, fine,'he said.'She gets chattier and more approachable by the day.

She seems to think we only have a day or so to travel before we get to the coast.'

And then we were going sailing. The cryptic Major Angela - so inscrutable behind that mask of her beard and her opaque eyes - had already informed us of this. I was dreading it. A terrible sailor, me.

'I think the spider's quite enjoying all the attention,' Sam said, squinting out of the windows, which were thickened and crazed with a coating of ice.

Out there, the Duchess was hovering stationary on the wind, arms busy at her sides, juggling balls of flame that she had generated herself. She was using them to warm the spider's limbs, rubbing a gentle incandescence along her body like soap. The creature was holding up her legs one at a time and flexing them gratefully at the warmth.

'Who would have thought it?' Gila said dourly.'That those two would bond like that.' _

Iris looked thoughtful.'I think romance is in the air.'

Now the cyborg had stretched out into flight, fledging her arms and describing arabesques on the gloomy air. A nimbus of flame coated her body and she floated lazily around and about the colossal arachnid.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Major Angela snapped, her face a picture of

disgust. 'A cyborg can't fall in love with a spider.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'A cat may look at a queen,' he said, mystiryingly.

'It's perfectly repulsive,' said the Bearded Lady. A revolting notion.'

'I think it's amazing,' Sam smiled.

She watched the mirror-ball eyes of the spider glitter as they followed the leisurely flight of the Duchess. She saw that Iris had been right: the two least humanoid in the party had fallen quite drastically for each other.

'This all just gets crazier,' Gila sighed, chomping at his toast. 'Do you always have this effect when you arrive in a place, Doctor?'

'Always,' said the Doctor absently.

'So do I,' put in Iris.

She was staring at the alligator man. How sharp his teeth looked now. His hide was greener, more livid, the cracks between scales oily and dark. His shoulders and neck had become thicker seemingly overnight. Even his eyes had a wilder look. No one had mentioned these recent alterations to his physiognomy. He had that look about him - that if any of them mentioned that he was slowly reverting to his alligator self, he would bite their head off. But all of them had their private suspicions as to what was happening.

The old bus was holding up pretty well, considering. Her battered external shell kept out the worst of their environment and she squealed her tyres on the thick ice, ploughing and plunging onward.

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One night the earliest Empress slipped her bonds once more to congratulate Iris on her ship and her motoring skills. By then they had covered a hundred miles or so of sheer and icy wastes.

'Oh hello, you,' said Iris. She was sitting up in the cab, warming her hands round a double gin and a Cuban cigar. The others were sleeping. 'I was wondering how long before I got my very own psychic visit from you.'

The Empress sighed.'And I thought I was taking you all by surprise, popping into your minds like this, unbidden, silent, slippery as a shadow.'

'Doesn't the Bearded Lady mind you gadding about like this?'

'Why should she mind?'

Iris shrugged inside her heavy furs and exhaled bright-blue plumes of smoke.'You're her property, after all. Or so she keeps telling us.'

She could feel the earliest Empress bridle and seethe with irritation. 'I'm no one's property, Iris Wildthyme. Least of all that blind, hairy, militaristic -'

'All right!' Iris laughed.'So what are you doing? What do you want to know?'

'I'm just after company,' said the Empress. 'Wouldn't you be, after a decade with that woman and her hairless bears, then before that, countless millennia stored in a jar with my eight-hundred-odd daughters?'

'I see your point,' said Iris, whose feet were always itchy.

'Tell you the truth, honey, I'm having the time of my life. I've never been among such a crowd.'

'Hmm. Me neither.'

'Your memories tell another story,' said the Empress, as if browsing through magazines. 'You've been mixed up in all sorts of crowds.'

That night went on quite easily, with the two countlessly old women swapping reminiscences as Iris sipped her gin. She poured some more and popped out briefly to chip off some ice. Then she heard what it was like to grow up in the Scarlet Palace, to be the first princess of a line that was to continue - so the viziers had predicted - for nine hundred generations. It turned out that the earliest Empress had once been called Cassandra and she happily gave permission for Iris to call her that now.

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She had been imported from another land, one in which people could fly; they could actually fly. When they visited the earthbound peoples of Hyspero - people who were caked in sand because their world was caked in sand, and they had never been bothered to shake it all out of their hair, their boots and blankets - they found that they were revered. The hawklike flying visitors were actually revered and asked by the populace of the desert world to stay and act as their demigods.

The visitors had better fish to fry, however. They claimed the arid world nevertheless, adding it to their stock of tame worlds, and leaving behind a particular family to rule it for them. They transformed the world, sculpted and preened it so that it wasn't quite as inhospitable as it had seemed to them. They made Hyspero into a dream world, a world where tales might unfold, a world of desire.

So they left behind the infant Cassandra and her keeper, a rather arch and sour old man. Cassandra grew up knowing that the world that was being so elegantly reconstructed all about them would one day be hers. The Hysperons looked on her as their prize; they grovelled at her childish feet as if she really had been left behind by the gods. And they saw to it that in the city of Hyspero was built for her the Scarlet Palace. Its turrets were set with rubies and their humble blood and flesh went into its mortar and masonry. The crimson pinnacles of the palace would last for thousands of years.

Cassandra had loved being Empress at first. When she first grew she loved to explore the various luxurious terrains that the scientists of her homeworld had brought into being with only, it seemed, the slightest tweakings of meteorological factors. She took a ship around her world on a stately visit and surveyed all that she owned. She encouraged offworlders to visit and so they came - in multifarious droves. Hyspero made a name for itself.

But the planet was never stable. Prompted and triggered into a state of reconstruction, it was set on a course that would be unstoppable. The world was forever in a state of change and flux. It was said by the alien visitors in those early years that anything standing still for too long on Hyspero was swallowed up and swept away by the bewildering rate of change.

It was Cassandra who introduced the splendid tradition of tattooing the Scarlet Guard. And didn't they look marvellous, in all their agonised

finery? Although, she admitted to Iris on the night they swapped life stories, the tattooing had got out of hand. It was her descendants and not she who had ordered the skinning, curing, stretching and hanging of the guards' gorgeous hides. Cassandra thought these practices utterly barbaric - one of the many evils she had sensed being perpetuated through the centuries, and another she was determined to put to rights once they returned to the city and the palace. 'Because that's what we're about to do, you see,' said the earliest Empress, 'Sorting out the various wickednesses of the current Empress.'

'I know.'

Cassandra fell quiet inside Iris's head then, and they absorbed the immensity of the dark and the glistening silence of the night frosts. 'Uh-oh,' came the voice again,'I can sense it again. A presence closing in on us. Something that knows we are here and sharing its wilderness.'

Iris came fully awake. 'Who? Our objective?'

'No - something far bigger. Beneath all this icy crust. Deep under the chilly water. Some massive presence.'

'Terrific.What is it?'

'I can't even make out a face. Just a load of vaguely malicious intentions. The mind I sense is too primitive for me to catch a hold. Its thinking is too fuzzy. But it's underneath us, certain miles under the ice, trying to tune in and find us. It can't, quite, yet.'

Iris shuddered.'Never a dull moment. Are you sure it isn't that spider thing you're picking up?'

'Oh no,' said the Empress Cassandra. 'She's got a fine mind. Wonderfully honed. One of those deliciously spiky and odd, spidery minds - just the sort that a spider ought to have. I was out there earlier tonight, talking to the spider and her lover.'

'Her lover? You mean the Duchess? You've been in communion with both of them?'

'Yes, it was rather interesting. The spider has been craving attention for years. The two of them are rather besotted with each other.'

'So I gathered.' "They're planning to mesh.' Iris swallowed.'What does that mean?'

'They're going to pool their resources. Become one entirely symbiotic creature.You'll see.' Iris squinted into the dark, but couldn't see much.'Well, good luck to them.'Yet she couldn't see the fun in becoming one with your lover in perpetuity. Surely half the fun was in not being doubled - in being two distinct persons, both individual.

'Don't be so humanist,' snapped the earliest Empress. 'Why should spiders and cyborgs think along the same individualist lines as you do? They can't think of anything better than being one partially cybernetic arachnid. They can't wait to get it together.'

'Stands to reason,' his mused.'Spiders and cyborgs are always wanting to evolve. To transgress, to become the next thing up the evolutionary scale. I suppose it's natural.'

'No it isn't; laughed the Empress. 'It is gloriously unnatural, and that is why they are both in bliss.'

With that, Cassandra, the oldest Empress of Hyspero, was gone and Iris was alone. She blinked and found that her mind was clear again.

'Doesn't she remind you just a little bit of Mae West?' The Doctor was standing beside the cab of the bus, leaning on her wheelchair. He was wearing one of his more infectious grins.

"That's it,' Iris laughed.'All that sassiness. That's exactly who she's like. How did you know I was talking to her?'

He shrugged and flopped down into the wheelchair. Outside the wind had picked up, and with a terrifying keen it rattled all the windows.

Iris said, 'She reckons that there's something under the ice. Hunting for us.'

He nodded. "The Scarlet Empress has given us a comparatively easy time so far. I thought she'd be sending something out to challenge us. Oh well. I'm sure it's nothing we can't deal with.' He rubbed his palms briskly, though she knew he couldn't really be cold. 'Why don't you go and rest? Everyone else is sleeping.'

'I think I will.'

'How are you holding up?'

'Oh... just about. I'll see this little jaunt through to its end.'

'I hope so, Iris.'

She looked worn, he thought, as she heaved herself out of the driver's seat. Her face was drawn and grey under the preposterous orange plant-pot hat.

'How far do you think we have before we get to the coast?' he asked, burying his concern in practical questions.

'Major Angela says we should get there sometime tomorrow.'

He smiled.'I'm a rotten sailor.'

'You're much more modest this time, you know. I remember a Doctor who claimed to have been instrumental at Trafalgar.'

'Do you?'

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Later that night, with dawn starting to shimmer on the furthest corners of the ice field, the Bearded Lady stole out of the bus and went to find the Duchess. She battled through the skirling wind and knew she was taking a ludicrous, foolhardy risk, going blind into the wilderness.

Heavy clods of snow and ice clung to her beard and her combat boots as she plodded, trying to keep track of her direction. For the past few days since leaving the seclusion of Kestheven she had tried to appear put out and cross at having to share her time with the others. Secretly, though, she was quite enjoying herself. The old fierce pleasure she took in danger was reviving in her. Her only regret was that Iris didn't run an altogether tighter ship. They were carrying on like civilians, like a picnic party. And she felt that the others were falling into the habit of mocking her bluster and effort at control. Especially that Doctor.

Worst of all, though, was the suggestion that the Duchess, fabled member of her own one-time crack fighting team, was actually in the

throes of falling in love with an arachnid. The idea turned her purple.

She ploughed on through knee-deep snow, managed to steer a brave and blind course between the ice ziggurats that had been sculpted by the winds.'Duchess?' she bellowed against the noise.'Are you still with us?'

She wanted, perhaps, to give the cyborg a piece of her mind. The idea was rather vague and unformed in her mind, but she did want to say her piece. She felt that somehow the Duchess was letting the side down by getting herself so involved. She needed a timely reminder of what their duties - as soldiers of Hyspero - actually were.

It had been Angela the Bearded Lady who, many years ago, had found the Duchess in the first place. On one of her few forays into further space she had become embroiled in a strange adventure on a life-sustainable moon. On that jewelled and arid mass Major Angela had found it necessary to put paid to the machinations of a powerful vizier called Sit al-Husn, who had been busily fashioning an entire race of cyborgs. For raw material he had been using the cannibalised spare parts of a colony of human beings who had crash-landed on his private moon. He rescued and utilised their hearts and minds.What luck for old Sit al-Husn! He had cracked open their shiny colony ship and found salvageable bodies of flesh suspended in gloopy life-giving syrups. The fight with him and his spanking-new cyborgs had been one of the Bearded Lady's earliest adventures, she reflected fondly - when her team had only three members. They had foiled the vizier Sit al-Husn's plans, destroyed his secret base and demobilised his hordes of marauding cyborgs - all apart from the Duchess, who, for reasons of her own, found the conscience to help them to win. Happier days. The team of three had become four and they had banished the vizier to Z-space, as she remembered, before they returned to Hyspero via his wonky and unreliable interstitial bridge. As far as Angela could make out, that was a kind of transdimensional escalator that had burned holes in her boots and given her a headache that lasted a week. So her fighting squad of bandits had been born.

Oh, and then, about a year later that same vizier had returned to take over all of Hyspero, his strength redoubled and his powers charged by a mysterious scimitar he had found deep in Z-space and he had come wanting to wrest the throne from the Scarlet Empress. She had called in the four to deal with him again. That time, too, it had been the Duchess who had saved their necks.

So many stories, Major Angela thought.

She stood at the mouth of the ice cave. She could almost feel the darkness within upon her skin. Blindness had made her extra sensitive to certain conditions and presences. Her beard actually bristled to tell her who was nearby.

These days she wasn't used to being out in such open spaces. It wasn't good for her to feel exposed or out in the open like this. Angela was used to having her protective bears at her back.

The ice at the mouth of the cave had melted and retreated a little and this sound attracted her - the steady drizzle of cold water. She knew the spider and the cyborg were beyond that curtain of melt water. She could sense the bulked, languorous shape of the spider just back from the mouth of the cave, draped in her netting.

'Dawn is up,' she said into the darkness.'We must be on our way.'

There was a hiss and a crackle and she knew when the Duchess was about to speak. The voice seemed to come from right beside her.

'Why did you come out here to talk with me?' asked the Duchess.

'No reason.'Angela found herself turning to go.

'You were thinking, weren't you, about the way we used to be? When we were together in one team? It isn't like you, Major Angela, to dwell upon the past.' The Duchess sounded curiously gentle.

Something twisted in Angela's gut. No, this wasn't like her. She was supposed to be tough as old boots. She was never given to remorse. She certainly never felt anxious about the future, as she did now. Something was pushing at the back of her mind this early morning. An awful sense of foreboding that was alien to her.

'You don't think that we are going to make it through this mission,' the Duchess said flatly. Once more, in that implacable manner, the cyborg had put her cold finger right on it.

'We're all so much older now,' said the Bearded Lady. Her shoulders had slumped. Suddenly she looked very small. 'No, I don't think we're going

to make it. How can we even think of going against the Scarlet Empress? Even at our height we wouldn't have dreamed of that.' She sighed. Then came sounds of stirring from within the ice cavern, as if the spider was waking and preparing to emerge.

'I have never heard you sound so defeated, Major Angela,' said the cyborg.

'To tell you the truth, what I feel like doing is just getting rid of this... thing for ever, here and now.' From inside her voluminous furs she produced the jar that contained the eldest Empress, Cassandra. 'I could burn a hole in the ice and we could drop her into the dark water and she'd be gone and the Empress would have nothing to pursue us for.' In the light of the morning the jar was a vivid heliotrope.

'No.'When the Duchess spoke again, her voice was somewhat altered. 'You'll do nothing of the kind, Major Angela.'

The Bearded Lady gave a little jump.'Why? What's happening?' Once again she cursed her blindness. She hated not knowing what was going on.

The Cyborg's voice had become louder and scratchier, and oddly-doubled.

'Gods...' Major Angela gasped, though she wasn't in the least bit religious.

She could feel something emerge from the cave. She knew that it wasn't the Duchess, and it wasn't the spider. It was something else, that gave off a fierce, metallic heat that seared her skin as it passed. The snow hissed, melting on contact. She could even smell rank, burning flesh and hair. She cowered.

What emerged from the crepuscular darkness of the ice cell was a spider, a little larger than the original spider, fashioned entirely from silver and glass. Its brittle legs hissed and snapped and sparked as it tested them out, as if it was a newborn creature, rather than the alchemical product sprung from a combination of two component beings. It moved with a certain ungainliness across the ice past Major Angela, its skin gleaming like a newly created alloy in the wavering sun. The ten eyes of the Duchess surmounted the original faceted eyes of the spider like a cluster of bright jewels studding the pommel of a sword. Those

vastly improved eyes drank in the light.

Even without being able to see this new being, the Bearded Lady knew exactly what had happened.

The hybrid creature spoke in both voices at once.

'You said we had all grown older, Major Angela. Whereas we... have made ourselves anew.'

'How?' asked the Major helplessly.

'It is accomplished. We are bonded.'

With each further, increasingly sure step that the Spider Duchess took, the snow and ice hissed and steamed. Her carapace was iridescent in the dawn. That brightness, that heat radiated outward and drew the others, aboard the bus, to the windows, to see the morning's new arrival. And also, the heat of this bonding drew the attention of the creature that was cruising them, and coming after them, far below the ice, in the still leagues of water below. This creature looked up, and saw a beacon leading to his goal in the shape of the Spider Duchess.

He heard the Scarlet Empress tell him to go in for the kill.

Chapter Twenty-Four
The Walrus and the Turtle

We spent some time that morning thinking about spiders.

Oh. I am the Doctor. I think I should explain. I'm not all that used to this first-person narrative mode. I've always had a liking for the free indirect. I'm not sure what this says about me. But... I'm holding the action up.

And what a lot of action there was after this!

First of all I was aboard with the others explaining that it was once believed - all over the cosmos, in many different traditions, as these beliefs are inclined to crop up simultaneously - that the souls of sleeping persons could leave their bodies in the form of spiders. Not a very comfortable belief, I agree. So when Sam, Iris, Gila and I woke and saw this incredible transformation wrought on the spider, my first thought was that someone's soul had crept out through the night and not returned. Odd thoughts. Then I realised that the spider and the cyborg had gone the whole hog and had linked themselves up into the same, incredible being.

Of course I thought of W.B. Yeats writing in that poem of his, 'changed, changed utterly / a terrible beauty is born.' Because there was indeed something compellingly beautiful about the altered creature we looked out and saw that morning.

The spider, I said to the others, was always looked upon as a rather untrustworthy creature. So was the lizard, and I stole a glance at Gila here, but didn't say anything. I've always thought of spiders as highly intelligent and organised, though I have never enjoyed their company much.

I asked Iris if she had ever happened across the outer worlds where spiders rule the roost? Very dark places. Terrible food, of course. Wonderful opera. I asked Iris,'Have you ever heard the spiders sing?'

The Spider Duchess was lowering itself to rest on the ice, as if she needed to recuperate from the shock of reinvention.

I thought about the myth that the spider lowers itself on a thread and is thus associated with joys descending from heaven. All nonsense, of

course.

I thought about the Duchess's decision to marry herself to all that tradition and that mythology. Both she and the spider had effectively placed themselves right outside any particular race. They had become completely unique. And then I thought that it wasn't so much like gaining a marriage partner, as gaining six extra legs. Iris seemed to read my mind just then and added, 'And the ability to spin thread.'

The silver arachnid spent some time on the ice, basking and recovering. I cooked us all up some breakfast - French toast and lashings of syrup - and we waited to see what the Spider Duchess was going to make of her new-found self. We couldn't quite be sure if we could still trust her. There was some heated debate on board the bus about whether we should simply drive on and see if she would follow, or whether we ought to try to communicate properly with her Major Angela came stomping and huffing aboard and said that the Spider Duchess had become a most uncommunicative colleague and wasn't saying anything much just at the moment. She looked sickened by the whole affair.

And then... and then the Spider Duchess called us out.

Her voice came insinuating across the plain of ice and we were drawn outside to speak to her.

'We are expecting company.'

'Who?' we asked.

'We can sense the approach...'

'Who? What can we expect?'

'We have bonded in order to protect us all from this oncoming threat,' said the Spider Duchess.

'Oh, great,' said Iris.

At which point the flat stretch of ice between our huddled party and the Spider Duchess exploded upward and outward in a vast, chilling surge of water and ice. Great jagged plates burst apart and were flung through the air. A gigantic body was heaving itself beneath our feet and struggling to crash through the ice. The water boiled in fury, in billows

and clouds of steam and all, for a few awful moments, was noise and confusion.

The creature beneath us threw back its grizzled head and roared. It surged out of the hole it had made.

'Uh, Doctor,' said Iris. She backed into the doorway of her bus. "That large and horrible creature we've been expecting - I think it's here.'

It was a walrus, incalculably ancient, the size of three double-decker buses. Before we could even react it had hauled itself out of the crack in the ice and thrashed around, trying to get to us. It looked so ungainly on the ground, sliding about on great black flippers that were each the width of a Volkswagen Beetle. It was dragging the solid bulk of its body behind - those massive haunches! I was spellbound by those fetid, yellow tusks, clagged with plaque, and the thick black whiskers that bristled from its jaw and round its jowls.

I yelled at everyone to get back aboard. They were stunned into confusion, scrabbling for purchase on the unsteady ground. Sam was shouting back at me: that if the ice cracked across we wouldn't stand a chance. Gila just looked ready for a fight.

But it was the Spider Duchess who came to our rescue. As the walrus got its bearings and roared and lumbered towards us, it was met in battle by that gleaming, now much less awkward composite being. Her legs were like tentacles, lashing out as she hurried towards it. She seemed almost to relish the sport of skittering and scampering around the beast, and throwing out cables of the thickest, stickiest web fluid you could imagine. Her legs bristled, flashed and jabbed at its leathery hide. It thrashed and screamed at the webbing she tried to lasso it with. It even gashed its own flesh with its tusks in the attempt to pull it off.

The many eyes of the newborn Spider Duchess glowed a coruscating green. She bought us time to hurry back to the bus. I grabbed the blind Bearded Lady by both arms and brooked no rebuke, manhandling her back to safety as she bellowed and demanded to know what was going on.

The Spider Duchess was almost dancing with glee on the ice.

At last, it seemed, she had found a worthy opponent upon which she could try out her new self, her whetted, augmented powers.

The walrus groaned and shrieked and started to flail its massive tail, making the plates of ice shudder and start to crack.

'Doctor...' Sam pulled at me, as if I had to sort this out. I turned to Iris. She had already launched herself out of her wheelchair, and was ransacking her little armoury - the weapons cupboard under the stairs. I tried to warn her: don't use anything too heavy, don't break the ice...

There was a crackle of livid energy on the air and a scream of rending metal and we whirled to see the walrus sinking one of its tusks into the Spider's metallic abdomen. Her legs flexed and shuddered spasmodically. Sam swore.

Gila then decided to take matters into his own hands. He bolted back off the bus and hurried across the ice. Great spumes of frost and ice impeded him like a mini storm, but he ploughed on and we saw him whirling a cleaver he had fetched from Iris's arsenal. As the walrus stepped up its onslaught against the Spider Duchess, Gila sank that cleaver into the creature's unguarded, blubbery and wrinkled elbow. The walrus screamed. With a careless flick it knocked Gila on to his back, and stepped on him with one damaged flipper. The wind knocked out of him, Gila struggled there, pinned, and it was a moment or two before he could howl his outrage.

'Do something!' Sam shouted.

'Sam!' Iris shouted back at her, and dragged her over to her rusty cache of weapons.

I said something like, 'I'm not having her using your filthy old weapons,' and I got knocked aside by the two of them. Underfoot the ice rocked and buckled once more. I couldn't even stand straight. Iris and Sam were breathlessly conferring.

Beside me Major Angela was fumbling with her fur coat, and produced the smooth glass jar in which the earliest Empress was kept. I was afraid she would drop it and Cassandra would be dashed to the ground. 'Maybe she can help us...' the Bearded Lady said.

'Don't count on it,' said Iris briskly, now bent over in the wheelchair at the door of the bus. Sam was helping her rig up some oddments from the armoury. They were hurriedly clicking together the legs of a tripod. I

dashed over to see them assembling a rusted contraption and was in time to see Iris produce, from an old locker, the longest, nastiest harpoon you have ever seen.

'It's a harpoon gun!' Sam cried.

Outside there was more noise as, in one sudden swoop, the Spider Duchess lashed back into life and attack. She gripped hard on to the sea beast's leathery back, confounding it. It bucked and jounced and howled, inadvertently freeing the enraged Gila. The Spider Duchess was thrown around, yet held on, her legs and tatters of web whipping in the frigid air as a blizzard of ice swept up around them.

I saw Iris quite methodically fitting and snapping together the last of her harpoon gun. Sam was hanging back now, gazing in appalled horror at the contraption she had, up until a few moments ago, been helping that wily old devil to construct. She was wrestling with herself, I could see it. She wouldn't help Iris any more, but she couldn't stop her any more. Sam looked at me. Iris got behind the contraption. She wedged her body into position. She squinted down the sightlines. Sam saw where she was aiming and suddenly yelled out,'Tell the spider, tell her to get out of the -'And Iris fired.

A whipping loop of metal cord shot out of the bus after the spear and the noise and the crack and the smell of the cordite was overpowering as Sam and Iris were thrown backwards across the gangway.

When the harpoon hit home there was an almighty wallop.

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The screen fizzles and crackles into life. Lurching views of the interior of the bus. Glimpses of the panic and flurries outside. Iris has grabbed her camera again and is recording, gabbling into the microphone.

We see the Doctor's appalled face and Sam running for the doorway.

Then the viewfinder fixes on the view outside.We see the battle in its dying throes.

The Spider Duchess is still lashing itself with webbing to the creature's back. The walrus has a spike lodged in its fleshy breast and it thrashes against the ice. Its screams ring hollow on the soundtrack, blocking out

everybody else's noise.

And we see Gila rolling and running free on the ice.

The walrus bleeds copiously down its leathery bib. It flails and tosses back that gargantuan head. The harpoon is stuck in it like a huge and silver thorn.

Gila is running towards us. His face is contorted.We see him heave on to the bus and he's wrenching the harpoon gun and rearming the device.

We hear the Doctor shout out in protest.

We see him run to stop Gila. Bodies cluster into view, jostling for control. Iris is yelling loudest now, right into our ears.

The camera is dropped and we see, oddly enough, a fairly benign view of a table lamp, an Art Deco number of a bathing belle holding the shade.

When Iris picks up our camera again, Gila has won control. He is arming the gun with explosives. And he fires.

'But the spider...' we hear the Doctor say, over the whine of the bolt as it is loosed and the lash of the cable.

Gila is a marvellous shot. It hits.

With a final howl of complaint the walrus explodes. In a ghastly, colourful instant its body is torn to shreds. Even if we run back and rewind this film now, it all happens too fast for video to quite pick up the intricacies of this onslaught. There is a flash, rolling plumes of filthy smoke and then... a shower of bloody, vast gobbets of flesh on the clean snow. Closest to us, closest to the bus and the camera, falls the ruined head of the behemoth. Its tusks have splintered into pieces. There is a hail of already clotting blood.

And, in the heart of the smoke and noise, we see the Spider Duchess crack into shards. Her legs are split and they tumble like straws. Her body, the thorax gashed and bursting apart like silver fruit, is flung clear.

All that can be heard aboard the bus is shouting.

Gila turns snarling to the camera. His face fills all our screen. His eyes are livid green. All trace of humanity appears to be gone.

The picture vanishes.

***

'If this was sent by the Scarlet Empress,' said Sam, 'won't she send something else after us?'

They were standing in the still-smoking, partially torn and bleeding sides of blubber.

'I'm sure she will,' said the Doctor tersely.

It had started to snow. The day was ending, it seemed. The dense sky was lowering in.

A few yards away the Spider Duchess was tending to her own wounds, which still blazed and sparked away. Gila and the Bearded Lady scooped up snow to put out the little flames and cool down her metal skin. She wasn't speaking yet.

Major Angela said,'You've wrecked her. You've blown her to pieces. I'm glad I couldn't see what you did.'

'Shut it,' Gila snarled, bending over the Spider Duchess's vast torso. He peered with expert care at the workings inside the gash in her flesh. 'She's going to survive this.'

'You blew most of her legs off. How can she move?'

The Spider Duchess spoke then, in a fractured voice that was much more identifiably a composite of two separate beings than before. 'I cannot move. I cannot move.'

The fizzing stumps of her once elegant silver legs waggled and thrashed in the chilling air. Her mandibles clattered with a kind of animatronic despair.

"We can't just leave her here,' said Sam, coming up to see.

'We must,' said Gila.

Major Angela started to argue, but the Spider Duchess interrupted her. 'Leave me here in the snow. Soon the Scarlet Empress will send her guard, to see how and why we destroyed her sea beast. I will be here to deal with them and prevent them from following you. You have to go on.'

'What will you do?' the Doctor asked.

'I will deal with them,' said the Spider Duchess. 'I will recover my strength and lie in wait in the snow. If the guards come to get you and drag you back to Hyspero, I shall put them off the scent. You all have to be able to return there under your own steam. The way you want. I will stop them for you.'

"Thank you,' said the Doctor.

'I wish I could come with you.'

'We'll come back for you,' the Bearded Lady promised. 'When it's all over.'

Then they walked back to the bus.

***

Iris's bus and Iris herself were relieved when they could drive free of the ice. A hundred miles or so on they found themselves back on frozen ground, and free of the risk of cracking the ice beneath them and plunging into the depths. Now they were close to the coast, and frosty, scrubby grass provided the only obstacle as they drove into the oncoming night. Major Angela listened to them describe the harsh landscape about them and she declared they were now very close to the sea.

They toiled up a hard-going hummock of land and there, beyond, was the flat dark sash of the sea, widening out before them. The stars looked brilliant. Iris gave a great sigh of happiness at the change in the view.

'Now I really feel we're getting somewhere,' she said, still at the wheel.

The Doctor was at her elbow. He nodded out to sea.'Look at that ship.' His eyes were narrowed. She was used to his eagle eyes by now and struggled to follow his gaze. True enough, just out to sea, in roughly the

stretch of beach for which they were heading, was a tiny, toy-like, distant vessel. Its silver sails bulged out in the moonlight and soon all the bus passengers were staring at it.

'Transport's been laid on for us, it seems,' said his.

'We've got someone to find, first,' said Angela.

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The Spider Duchess began her slow, slow, infinitely slow drag towards home. Her blasted legs, like errant children, came twitching and sliding on the ice towards her.

***

And when they drove down to the shingle beaches the next morning, they found him.

A restless night had been spent aboard the bus, with everyone apart from the moody, shifty Gila, sitting close for comfort and warmth, wrapped inside their furs from the Kestheven bears. In the night Iris had sat a little while alone, watching the vast churn and shimmer of the dark sea. She opened the doors and went out for a cigarette, bracing herself against the side of the bus and hugging herself for warmth. Perhaps she was feeling a little better. She stamped her feet on the rutted, frozen road.

And then, out of nowhere seemingly, a cat slunk past her. She saw its eyes first, lit up in the night, flat pale discs of green. Then she looked and the cat stared back. It had one tattered ear, as though it had been brawling. It looked altogether tatty and aloof. It came slinking out from under her bus, looked at her briefly, then padded off into the stiff white stalks of the grass, and vanished. She shrugged and stamped on her cigarette butt.

That had been last night. In the morning they were busy again, rolling along by the seaside, looking for Major Angela's elusive fourth member.

To Sam, this whole place looked benighted and empty. As if there had never been a living soul on this beach. Then, suddenly, Gila barked out in surprise and made Iris pull over.

He led them out of the bus, and across the shingled beach. They ran, crunching the gravel and pebbles and shells underfoot.

Right where the sea was caressing the rocks of the shore, there was a plinth set into a kind of protected bay. The plinth was streaked white with salt, partially eroded and whittled into a stunted, grotesque form. Atop the plinth there was a block of ice, about the size of a grown man. It was ice like glass, faceted and brilliant, cut to perfection, but twisted and uneven in shape. As they approached it looked to Sam like a shrine. Within the ice she could now see a dim shape trapped within.

The Doctor came last, huffing and pushing Iris over the shifting stones in her wheelchair. The small wheels ground arthritically on the shingle, cracking delicate purple shells. He heaved and hauled her over banks and tatters of leathery brown seaweed.

By the time Iris and the Doctor reached the plinth and the ice, the others were staring upward at it with satisfaction.

'This has to be him,' said Major Angela.

"They froze him, they said. They said they put him where the sea would get him again. But it hasn't. He's been here ten years.' Gila sounded calmer now than he had in days.

The ice was pierced in many places by a bewildering assortment of daggers and knives and scimitars.'It looks like a giant pin cushion,' said the Doctor. He could never be sombre when everyone else was. He couldn't bear it. 'Or a giant game of Ker-plunk.'

'I've got that game in the bus,' said Iris.

'Or,' said the Doctor,'it looks like Excalibur.'

They took his word and each of them grasped the jewelled pommel of every sword and knife they could reach. Gila stretched up and took hold of the higher ones. They all pulled and, surprisingly, each of the blades slid out quite easily and cleanly.

They stood back.

'We can all be King Arthur,' the Doctor grinned.

'Now what?' asked Sam.

He pursed his lips and nodded at the ice. It was shimmering and pulsing and it began to melt. Condensation wisped and moisture rolled down the plane surfaces of the ice.

'He's waking up,' Angela said.

Soon they could get a better look at him. His head and shoulders emerged first, and he sat immobile, recovering himself, though they could all see he was returning to life. When his feeble arms emerged he flexed them gentry and the solid block of ice that trapped the rest of him began to crack much faster.

'It's him,' Iris smiled.

Sitting upright in his dewy, sticky shell was the Mock Turtle. His heavy calf s head was damp and his eyes were bleary, stuck together with decade-old ice and sleep.

'He looks,' said the Doctor,'as if he's just been bom, all over again.'

'I wasn't born,' said the Mock Turtle in a throaty whisper, 'I was hatched from a great big blooming egg.'

He shook himself and the last of the ice slid away. He asked them to help him down from the plinth.

'Doctor,' Sam said, tapping his velvet shoulder.'I hate to say this, but...'

'Say what?'

'Something along the lines of,"Doctor, look!"

He rolled his eyes.'They always say that.'

'But look!' Iris cawed.

Into the bay, with its wide white sails blazing and shining, the ship that had last night been in the far distance came rolling full of splendour and aplomb. From their shore, the party from Iris's TARDIS could see that it was launching smaller rowing boats, brimming with busy-looking figures, and they were heading determinedly for land.

'Pirates,' spat Gila.

'That ship is theKristeva ,' Iris said.'It's captained by the daughter of the Empress!'

Chapter Twenty-Five
On The Kristeva

I am a turtle. Not the happiest of fetes.

I have a shell. I have flippers. I get nowhere fast. Unless I am underwater. Then I can do anything. Watch me go. In the past, when I hired myself out with the other three on adventures and quests, all the watery assignments fell to me. Of course the Alligator Man, Gila, thought he was fast and fleet as I, as neat and polished as I, but my point remains that, essentially, he is a creature of the land.

He hated that.We weren't a very happy band, we four.

Turtles are born of eggs. I can even remember cracking out of mine. What we tend to do, most of us anyway, is peck the egg apart from within with our little beaks and then we go lolloping up the beach to the sea's first cold embrace. At first you're born and you think, But I'm so ungainly! And then, no, not at all, that isn't the whole story at all, not when you get to the froth of the blissful, blooming water and you get all your faculties.

Of course, being a Mock Turtle, I had it harder from the start. I had this different head and my forelegs terminated in - of all things -hooves. Very shiny, pointed, rather delicate hooves, but hooves nonetheless, and I had flippers only at the back.

When I was born, when I hatched myself, I had to hammer the inside of my warm, creamy, coated egg with the fine tips of my hooves to break myself on to the golden sands. I had it harder from the start. Only a Mock Turtle, me.

And for the last ten years I've been frozen up, freed from the uniqueness of my bodily self, with only my mind ticking over. Luckily I find myself a low-level telepath (oh yes, only very low-level, as the Duchess once happily informed me, putting me in my place) and so, via various unreliable but nonetheless entertaining psychic channels,! have managed to keep my suspended self abreast of the ways of this maverick world. Even incarcerated I kept up.

I listened, year by year, as the Scarlet Empress gathered force, hatched her plans, spread her web. I overheard her guards as she sent them

around the globe . I earwigged on djinn and viziers as they set stealthily forth to carry out her nefarious business. I know her schemes and dreams. So when my friends here arrived and unloosened the spell that held me in ice, I realised that the time had come to confront our overweening monarch. I have felt the approach of my compatriots, bless them.

It was the Scarlet Empress who put me here.Who froze me in ice, set me upon a plinth, who left my mind running on and on like a tiger in a too-small cage. She put me out of action in the place that would most torture and tantalise me: right beside the sea. I have tried to block out the sense of that surging mass of water, its salt-water tang, its relentless calling me back.

And in these past ten years, did anyone, did any of my former allies and companions, come rushing to my rescue? Oh, no. Of course they didn't. At first I felt sure, sure as could be, that they'd come after me soon. If not today, then tomorrow, or the day after. I pictured them struggling against the odds to come and fetch me. But they never showed up. More fool I, to have confidence in my supposed blooming friends. The days, the months, the seasons passed and nothing happened. Major Angela, the obstreperous, unfortunately blind and blustering Bearded Lady, who once claimed passionately and against all the odds to be in love with me, with my lovely gleaming horny shell of green and greasy brown, my soft yellow underbelly - did she come running to collect me from my peril? No, she did not. Did Gila leave his life of petty thievery and urban crime? His smuggling and racketeering and shady connections? He came nowhere near me. His thoughts never turned to me. Did the Duchess deign to wing her divinely solar-powered way to this benighted shore? Did she hell. And so here I am. And here they are. Suddenly wanting my help.Well.

And who is this? New friends and new companions to play with.

I turn to the human female. She is still a child, really, with soft blonde hair and a face glum as I'm sure I must look just now.'And what manner of creature are you, my dear?"

She looks startled at my question as if a creature such as I ought not to be able to express and frame ideas or opinions.

But we are on the move. We are in convoy. We are being led up the beach by a rabble of pirates. Of course. I felt the presence of the ship

approaching even as I sensed my friends, drawing closer to rescue me.

And so now we are all in the same predicament. Prisoners together. I

sensed the pirates coming, I sensed my rescuers coming. Not bad for a mere low-level telepath! Not bad for a mere Mock blooming Turtle!

The ship stands in the bay. Proud, bedecked by all manner of banners and gaudy, makeshift sails and, I must say, I'm enjoying colours again, only as I did when I was first hatched. The world is all new to me again. Our rowdy rabble of captors in their filched and patched and extravagant outfits catch my eye, too, and I spend some time, as we are hustled up to the boats on the shore, simply admiring the spectacle.

Ahead, though, looms the Kristeva , and I must seriously consider whether I really want to be taken prisoner so soon, so soon after my rescue. The ship is a fat-bellied, fierce little tug, bristling with armaments and a glow of self-worth. Aggressive thing, staffed with bandits, burly henchmen and scum. How many of its scurrilous ventures and ploys I have tuned in to over the years, through the use of my stunted telepathic capabilities. I have followed the doings of the Kristeva , her crew and her captain with a certain relish.Yet I am in two minds about being rowed and taken aboard.

I am being carried aloft on a kind of bier. I haven't much strength as yet. Gila, this girl child, and a tall man with curly hair are bearing my weight, none too steadily, as we progress towards the boats.

'I'm Sam,' says the girl. 'And this is the Doctor.'

I blink at them. In my past life, I was always pleased to meet new faces. I oughtn't let my standards slip. Remember your manners. Manners maketh the genetic freak.

The gangly tall man fixes me with a sudden piercing stare. He gabbles at me excitedly, 'Isn't it exciting to be kidnapped by proper, seafaring pirates!' He's talking to me as if he finds nothing strange in addressing a creature such as I. I can tell he's trying to be worldly and nice, refusing to comment on my hybridised oddity.'Don't you find that remarkable?' he asks me.

For talking too loudly he receives a hefty shove from one of the pirates. A peculiarly attenuated being, with a scandalously long neck, and a

dagger clamped in its pointed beak. Wears an eyepatch too, playing its part to perfection.

Alongside us is a woman being pushed in a wheelchair. She looks somewhat defeated, folded in on herself, her hands clasped firmly in her lap. Her eyes, though, are alive with interest, taking the whole scene in.

'Gila, Gila, my friend,' I call out to the bulkiest, the most scaly of my pallbearers. The one in whom you may imagine I have most in common. But the Alligator Man just glares and glowers at me as if he isn't really delighting in our reunion at all. Major Angela, naturally, cannot see me. She is being led by another, swarthy, pirate, and when I call out to her, she ignores me. I can't see the Duchess at all.

Oh, what a relief to breathe air again. My lungs, also, feel quite new and restored. Bliss to waggle my flippers and hooves.

They put us - none too gently, in fact - in a small wooden boat and my compatriots are compelled to row. I lean and listen to the regular suck and slap of the cold, cold, cold waves. And how I've missed being able to listen, to really listen, to things. And maybe I could just - while no one was looking - flop myself over the mildewed lip of the boat, and kick myself off into the delicious freezing water. Never be heard of again. Temptation shivers me timbers of course, and grips me vitals in a tight swell somewhere beneath my bulky shell. How I would love to slip away now, into the sea.

But I can't I can't I can't leave my blooming friends. Oh no! Not me!

I'm loyal as loyal can be!

Another boat is rowing alongside us.

And here, here at last, is Julia. Standing like a prow in the other humble landing vessel. Head flung back, laughing up her guts and the sea wind swooshes her gorgeous locks about. Proud, daring Julia. The heiress to all of Hyspero. The favourite of the Empress. The most daring and deadly pirate on the many seas of this world. She has the world in her hands already, but how widely it is known and feared, the fact that she would rather be a criminal and common cur, and steal it for herself. Julia clad head to toe in scarlet leather - quite a daring cut of outfit in itself. I note she's put on a little weight, and is squashed into her outfit a few ounces cosier than she would like. Good living does that, of course, and

I imagine Julia's living is just fine. She has a golden megaphone in one gloved hand, which she brandishes and then holds in front of her mouth. She brushes away her streaming, crimson hair and it whips in the salt breeze. Ravishing pirate princess, hectoring her captives. I try to wave to her, remembering the time we once met, in her mother's palace, but she ignores me, preferring to address us as a group. I sit up and realise that my strength is, little by little, drop by vital drop, returning to me.

Captain Julia of theKristeva is telling us something very simple. Through her megaphone she tells us it repeatedly, and with a certain aplomb.

'You are now prisoners of the Hysperon Empire! You are prisoners of the Scarlet Empress!'

Of course, of course, we already knew that.

Major Angela is muttering filthy swear words in the general direction of Julia's boat. Look at how long the Bearded Lady's beard has grown! Most distinguished. A proper set of facial hair adorning her noble jutting jawline. What a pity she cannot look upon her own reflection. She doesn't seem very enchanted by my presence. This isn't at all how I imagined my return to life. Was I expecting parties and a great hullabaloo? Best to expect little, and make the best of what you get. So I will keep quiet.

This human child, Sam, seems rather nice and I shall think about befriending her. Make the Bearded Lady jealous, perhaps. Oh, I'm thawing nicely, with sensation stealing back in lively spurts and fits and starts. I can grind my teeth and stir my flippers and no longer do I shiver. The crystals of ice on my long, long lashes have melted clear away, and so have those up my bovine nostrils. I give a small, a very small, moo of pleasure, and get a dirty look from the Alligator Man.

'My friends,' I announce cautiously, 'I am returned to life and full working strength!'

I try to stand in the boat, which rocks and makes it quite difficult.

'Much good it will do us,' Gila grunts. He was always very disparaging of my abilities.'We're going to be killed for sure. Either aboard that ship, or by the time we get back to Hyspero.'

'Is that so?' I ask.

He rolls his quite malevolent eyes. Poor Gila, I see, is looking more of a lizard than ever. See how his jaw has stretched into a rictus, a muzzle. His teeth are dagger-like and protruding, overlapping. Has anyone mentioned to him how much he has reverted, and how much less human he looks? Perhaps they have.

'Is it up to me,' I begin,'to devise a sudden plan of escape?' I flick my eyes around the whole, doleful bunch of them. None of them look too clever and eager. 'Is it my turn now?'

Gila snorts in derision. He was always doing that.

'Have you got any ideas?' Someone leans closer to me. Taking me seriously at last. It is the man that the human child called Doctor.

'I might utilise my low-level telepathic abilities to call up some help.'

"Then, go on!' he urged me.

Already the boats were pulling up close to the gaudy mass of the mother ship. We could hear the relentless slap of the waves against her prow. Rope ladders were sent down with a sudden, weighty flourish, unsc rolling and tumbling, their feet hitting the sea with a series of deft splashes.

'Do something,' hissed the Doctor and I close my heavy-lidded eyes and I began to concentrate.

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The Captain of theKristeva , Julia, was already clambering up one of the ladders. First aboard as usual, as was correct. Her henchmen drew the two small boats together and they set about manhandling us prisoners and getting us to take our turn in climbing up the cold, wet ropes.

And I concentrated. I fixed my tiny mind on the creature only'certain leagues away. The creature who might just help us.

The old woman in her wheelchair moaned disconsolately.'How am I going to get up there in this thing? I can't climb!' She set her face defiantly.'What are you going to do about it?'

The pirates laughed and kicked her chair overboard. They held on to her and rocked with mirth as she watched her chair glug and sink.

Gila, oddly enough, leapt to the old lady's defence. He struck the one with the long neck and the dagger in its beak and knocked it off balance. It fell backwards into the water. Pandemonium, suddenly, as the prisoners jostled and made both boats rock and sway in the water and the pirates struggled to take control and fish their shrieking, heron-like compatriot out of the chilling sea. An ape creature pounded at Gila's back and the two of them wrestled, threatening to capsize all of us. Everyone was shouting. Loudest of all was the bellowing of Captain Julia, as she hauled herself aboard her ship, and looked down in disgust at the fracas below.

Major Angela had set her thick hands about the neck of a man-sized rodent. Sam was being squashed into the hull of our boat by the struggle and the Doctor rushed to free her.

And all the while I concentrated. I was calling on help. The sea rose alarmingly on either side.

Sam was suddenly on her feet and in the fray. Gila tossed her a knife and she caught it automatically, staring at it. The elderly lady grabbed it from her and turned to stab, but the heron-like creature in the eyepatch was back, squawking and lashing out with a deadly beak. There was barely room to stand or for us all to stand safely.

And still I concentrated.

Pirates were coming down from the Kristeva . They yelled out angrily - reinforcements. Julia was sending them down, armed to the teeth, climbing hand over hand to help out.What a noise we made! We small, resilient band!

And then, inevitably, we capsized.

The two boats rode up in a sudden swell. And suddenly all fights were broken up as we were flung into the water. The reinforcements jumped off their ladders to haul us aboard.

But by then I had succeeded.

I had called up a reinforcement of our own. And nothing could send him

back now.

I dived deep into the water and saw him. He was coming for us.

How wonderful the water felt.

I swam back to the surface, where the others struggled and flailed.

'He's coming!' I shouted, waving my hooves so they would all notice and realise my success.

'Who?' I heard the Doctor shout.

They turned to look. All of them turned to look.

Behind us, dwarfing the bulk of the Kristeva herself: the humped purple back and sheaf of fins cutting a swathe through the sea. How they all stared! How their jaws dropped! They all ceased to struggle after that.

He opened his gigantic maw as he bore down on us all. There was barely time to shout.

The oldest, biggest fish in the world, had come at my bidding. I had pulled a few strings to get him there. Oh, what a success.

We saw his mouth open and it was like the gateway to heaven. It was huge.

I was pulled in. I plunged gladly into his overarching maw. I turned head over heels, flippers over shell over hooves. I caught a glimpse of the Doctor, spinning through the water, and the old woman, sans wheelchair and then...

Then the maw of the sea beast clamped tight shut and it was dark and smelly and hot and the water he had swallowed slewed us around, in the tight compression of his massive guts. We were compelled through the force of his monstrous peristalsis to pass through the miles of his tubing and pipes and, at last, we were swallowed. Fetched up neatly in the dark of his stomach. I couldn't tell how many we were, but we few lucky swallowees were safe, at least, from the pirates. I had done my job.

Then, there was a grand, cresting, violent lurch, and the behemoth plunged and surged ever deeper, towards the bottom of the sea.

Chapter Twenty-Six
In the Belly of the Beast

What a motley crew they made. It was the only word for it. Julia of the Kristeva had assembled the roughest bunch of scavengers and rogues in all of Hyspero to tend to her and go about her work. They were cheap and desperate and they took every opportunity to bait the poor, bedraggled prisoners who lay, dripping, exhausted, hopelessly outnumbered on the none-too-clean deck of the ship. Captain Julia stood among them, arms akimbo, laughing along with her rabble.

Around her were clustered the most trusted members of her crew. The beaky, crazed-looking heron creature, a Sahmbekart, reptilian and coloured a glittering jade, a bipedal tiger and, looming closest over the captives, a shaved bear. Luckily Major Angela could not see this particular specimen. Sam thought she would feel terribly betrayed if she knew that one of the crew was part of her own little family.

But Sam was still reeling in shock from what she had seen, and what had just occurred.

'He's really dead; she said to Gila. 'This time, he's really dead. That Jaws thing... it...'

Gila nodded and said gruffly, matter-of-factly,'I think you're right.'

To Sam, their whole quest suddenly seemed pointless. With the Doctor, Iris and the Mock Turtle abruptly, intractably dead. She had seen each of them swallowed. And then the beast had surged away, quickly as it had come, leaving them shell-shocked and numb, watching in its wake.

Sam had had just a glimpse of the monstrous fish's vast, purple, shining scales, and then that terrible maw. Teeth standing high as dustbins and water crashing through the gaps between. The jaws had clamped shut against them, once the Doctor, Iris and the Turtle were swallowed, and the fish was gone, splintering the two small boats to wreckage as it went. The survivors were lucky not to have been sucked under in the pull of its departure. Sam must have swallowed gallons of water. Right now she wanted to throw up.

Julia snarled at them, and tossed her head. 'My mother's going to be disappointed. She wanted me to bring you all in alive.'

This was too much for Sam. Without even thinking, she hauled herself up and flung herself bodily at the Captain of the Kristeva .

Julia was caught unawares and staggered under the impact. Her trusted heron-like lieutenant wrenched at Sam and the girl felt herself pinned to the deck, by the weight of wet musty wings. She rolled and groaned and lashed out with arms and legs and saw, briefly, dazedly, that Julia was drawing out her blade. Sam yelled and saw Major Angela throw herself blindly into battle, producing a short, deadly sword from somewhere or other and screaming about not being taken without a fight.

They were terribly outnumbered. Sam thought very clearly, We're all going to die.

And then she thought.Where's Gila?

And there he was. Right behind the Bearded Lady, pitching and cannoning into the melee. He took down three of the henchmen in a series of deadly blows and then they were all upon him. He flashed his strong, coruscating tail (He has a tail now? Sam wondered, as the heron let his grip slip and she rolled away, to join in the battle) and he brought down the tiger with a crash. In the rumpus there was a bewildering, kaleidoscopic morass of hides and feathers and skins and blades. Sam struck out, fighting her way closer and closer to Julia, determined suddenly to somehow force the gloating captain to call off her dogs.

Gila fought happily. He parried and thrust, feinted and dived. Gouts and spurts of variously coloured blood arced out across the air. There were screams but he let nothing confuse him. This must be like the old days for him, Sam thought: a proper punch-up.

And then, at the pitched battle's height, they all saw Julia take her blade with a curious, graceful calm, push her way through the crowd to Major Angela, who was lashing out sightlessly and making a good job of it. Julia took her rapier, sliced it through the air, and stabbed the Bearded Lady neatly through the chest. Nothing to quite finish her off, but enough to make her stop and think.

Angela squawked once and dropped to the wooden floor. Before she even hit the deck her blood had soaked the white of her uniform jacket.

The fighting stopped.

'Take them below,' the ship's Captain sneered. 'And you three just think yourselves lucky I'm under instructions to take you in alive. I'd like to keelhaul you all for this.'

They were gripped then, and held, and forced to watch as Julia swept away. Then they were led off, below, into the dank of the Kristeva's hold.

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When they woke up, they found they were lying on ground that was moist and fleshy, naturally. But they were surprised to find that they weren't drowned, or swimming in some horrid imbroglio of intestinal acids and juices. The Mock Turtle was first awake, and had dragged the Doctor and Iris to a pink-floored, low-ceilinged cell where they could wake in comfort and find themselves wringing wet and battered, but oddly alive and out of danger.

So they woke, almost together, and looked around. And they were shocked to find the space lit by an odd, pinkish iridescence. The light pulsed gently as if to a distant, regular heartbeat.

'Swallowed; said Iris gloomily.'Swallowed and sunk. Oh, Doctor.WeVe really gone and done it this time.'

'Um,yes,' he said. He was trying to catch up with events.'I don't think this has ever happened to me before.'

'It has to me; said the Mock Turtle, rather lightly. He was sitting on an upturned urn, a little apart from them. For a second he regarded them balefully. I take it that you're not very impressed with my means of escape.'

'It's dreadful!' spluttered Iris.

The Mock Turtle chuckled. "That's what I said, the first time I washed up here. But it isn't so bad.'

The floor gave a lurch then, shifting underfoot, and shivering with a peculiar kind of spasm, as if just to remind them that this whole, damp edifice was alive.

'I think you should rest, Iris,' the Doctor told her solemnly. 'Catch up with

yourself while this Turtle person and I have a chat about what exactly we can do next.'

She was gloomy.'We can't do anything next,'she moaned, lying down. 'We've had it this time. And the next thing will be our getting digested and then where will we be...?'Promptly she fell asleep.

'Right,' said the Doctor.'Tell me about it.'

***

TheKristeva was filthy enough to strike Sam as authentic, as the way a real pirate ship might be. Not every roving adventurer travelled in the kind of slightly distressed but homely gentility that the Doctor enjoyed.

She supposed that pirates liked things rougher, plainer, and this place was certainly that. But she didn't want to think about the Doctor now.

The cramped rooms below deck had wooden walls encrusted with black grease from the oil lamps that lit the place only fitfully. As the ship rolled, the lamps would swing with them, throwing ghastly shadows about the passageways they were forced to walk. Oddly shaped objects lay about everywhere, tripping them up, and Sam could only guess at their purpose. It seemed a very slackly run vessel.

There was a sense, she thought, in which this crew of theKristeva were onlyplaying at being pirates, in the way that some of her friends had, on the streets years ago, much to Sam's youthful indignation. They wore striped sailors' tops and kerchiefs and carried clumsy weapons, as if for show rather than use. All to complete the image. Some of them even wore eyepatches. All this Sam took in distractedly as she was led with the others to their cell. What she was really focusing on was the idea that this time the Doctor was gone for good.

Usually, at least once a week, it seemed that he had bitten the dust or cooked his goose or gone off to the great big space opera in the sky. And for those times she had a particular state of mind she had developed, and she would let it take over her. A sort of numbness which would allow her to deal with her current predicament (and there was always one of those) and hang around and deal with stuff, and be ready, prepared, for the moment when, Lazarus-like, the Doctor would, all of a sudden, pop up again, alive-o. She hoped. She had become a fierce hoper.

Now she was stuck with a savage and fierce Gila, who simply wouldn't be pacified as they stomped desultorily into the gloom of theKristeva , and the wounded Major Angela, who was white-faced with shock and bleeding still, if a little less profusely. She had been issued with dirty rags to try to stem the flow.

The Sahmbekart member of the crew, a towering, witless figure, led them to where they would be held until the ship reached Hyspero.

'I need help,' the Bearded Lady said. "This wound is -'

'It's a flesh wound,' the huge figured grunted.

'But you're meant to be keeping me safe and alive, ready for my audience with the Empress.'

The creature wasn't having this. 'We cannot be held responsible for the frailty of your species. You ought to protect yourself better.'

Major Angela shot back with,'And what, grow an exoskeleton?'

The Sahmbekart looked at Gila. "This one has. Why can't you?'

The Bearded Lady was stymied.

***

Iris woke and had no idea how much time had passed.

'Think of yourself as outside of time,' the Mock Turtle was telling the Doctor, in that doleful voice of his.'Can you imagine such an idea?'

The Doctor gave a rueful smile.'I can give it a go.'

'While we are inside the Great Fish,' said the Turtle grandly.'the world outside need hardly exist. It does not impinge here, where we are perfectly preserved and safe.' The Turtle was making it sound like an almost religious experience, Ms thought. Perhaps, to him, that was precisely what it was.

'If you stay inside here long enough,' the Mock Turtle went on, 'you could even meet yourself. Imagine that!'

"This is all very interesting,' said the Doctor, spurred on by Iris's wakening and the rather anxious look she was giving him, 'but do you think you can help us find a way out? We're concerned about the others.'

'Life will go on outside the fish,' intoned the Turtle. 'But for a while, we are exempt from it.We have time to reflect.'

'I hate time to reflect,' coughed Iris, struggling to her feet.

'Sometimes the fish will talk to you,' said the Turtle. 'He will address you, aware that you are inside his stomach, and he will ask you about yourself. Do not fear him. But be aware that his memory is atrocious. It renews itself every five or six minutes and he needs to be reminded of things. This is the direct result of the pollutants that the Scarlet Empress has emptied into our seas. They say these pollutants are the by-products of her experiments in her quest for ever more rarefied life-preserving unguents. But she is slowly poisoning the denizens of the Hysperon oceans.'

'Well, that's a shame,' said the Doctor sincerely, 'but if we can't get out of the fish, then there's nothing we can do to stop the Empress, is there?'

'So if the fish asks you who you are, he will ask you again and again. Yet this in itself is useful. It forces you to keep yourself in line. In an epistemological sense, at least.You can't get complacent, even if you are outside of time and the known world.You are made to wonder,Who am I now? Am I the same person as this morning? And have I changed somewhere in between? Am I still essentially me? Useful questions, you see. I've always thought rather a lot of this sort of continuity, haven't you?'

'Well -' began the Doctor.

Iris interrupted. 'No. Because if you don't mess up your own continuity, there's always some other bugger who'll do it for you.' She took off her felt hat, wrung it out and shook it back into shape. 'I don't even pretend to be consistent.'

'I'd noticed,' said the Doctor.

'What if?' said the Turtle suddenly. They looked at him. 'I mean,' he said, 'what if we pass some of the time playing a small game of "what if?" It's

my favourite game.We don't know how long we will be here. So why don't we play the "what if?" game?'

'He's bananas,' said Iris. 'It's because of all that time in the ice.'

The Doctor wasn't very keen on playing either. But he knew that the Turtle knew more about their situation than either of them, so he decided to play along.

'I wish I had hair,' said the Turtle. 'What if I had hair? You both have lots of hair. Ape primitives, I suppose, are your ancestors.'

'Not really,' said the Doctor sniffily.

'Hair is such an index,' said the Turtle,'of the way you people live. Cut it off, it grows again. Hair is continuity.You can see where you've been.'

'You have a shell,'Iris perked up.'Isn't that the same thing? Don't you get an extra ring, another marking for every year?'

'Oh yes,' smiled the turtle.

'I want a go at "What if?",' said Iris suddenly, and rounded on the Doctor. 'I want to know what if, I mean, what happens if it was in fact you who defeated the Dalek invasion of Earth? What if you opened the Cyber Tombs on Telos? What if you were the one who was there when the Great Fire of London broke out? What if that was all you, and not me? What does that do to my timeline? Does that cancel me out?'

'But I did! It should!' cried the Doctor. 'All of those things were me.' He frowned.'I think.' Then he waved his arms.'Anyway, do shut up, Iris. This whole thing is enough like being stuck in some ghastly Zen parable without your making it even worse.'

Iris smiled sweetly at the perplexed Mock Turtle. "The poor Doctor is simply overcome with existential angst.'

The Turtle shook his head.'He's all tangled up in himself, this one,' he said sadly.'Perhaps he should have all his hair cut off.'

'No!' the Doctor snapped. 'Look, what if we built a large fire out of driftwood or something, and made the fish sneeze us out?'

'Never works,' said the Turtle.'He never sneezes.'

The Doctor sat down heavily.'Are we even moving?'

'Oh, yes.'

'How can you tell?'

'I'm in constant contact with the fish. My low-level telepathic capabilities are chattering away to him, reminding him we are here.'

'Remind him not to digest us,' Iris shuddered.

Tell him we want to be let out,' the Doctor demanded. 'Go on, tell him!'

***

They were locked into a cabin with washing lines stretched taut across it. Laundry hung dripping and spilling puddles of water on the dirty floor. The air was rank and steamy, and was almost unbearably muggy to breathe. It seemed, however, to cheer Gila, who inhaled more easily in the swampy atmosphere.

They sat and waited. They checked Major Angela's wound, and it didn't seem too bad, so long as she got it looked at properly in the next few hours.

They sat quietly to wait. The crew left them alone. They sat without saying much to each other.

Eventually the Bearded Lady tried to pick a fight. She was bored and pained and crotchety.'Anyway, we're better with the Doctor and Iris out of the picture. They were a hindrance. That Iris was the worst. Meddling old fool. Where did you pick up that old fossil?'

Gila hissed and managed to shut her up, and then assuage Sam.'We'd have been dead long ago if it hadn't been for those two.' Sam let the argument go by. She was thinking about the Doctor. Thinking about first wandering into his Ship. About their first months travelling together, how breathless and hair-raising it had all been. Their time of separation. Their reunion. How it was different now, but still as good, if not better, that she was grown up. And now him gone. She couldn't imagine being without him.

Gila was pacing the grimy confines of their cell.

'What I want to know,' he said to Angela at last,'is how you came to have the first Empress in your possession anyway.'

She raised her eyebrows and looked smugly inscrutable at this.

From somewhere they could hear engines powering up, as if in preparation to put some speed on. Obviously theKristeva was about to go dashing back to Hyspero, full steam ahead, for a private audience with the reigning monarch, the Captain's mother.

Gila beat the walls in frustration. If only he could somehow get to radio ahead, he could have his own brigands and ne'er-do-wells waiting at the docks. He could engineer a rescue of sorts. He set to work unpicking the impressive array of antiquated locks that held them prisoner. It looked like a hopeless task.

***

The idea of being once more outside of time had hit the Doctor where it did him most damage. He had set about waxing philosophical. Iris ground her teeth.

He was giving an account of himself. 'My job is rather like a doctor in a hospital, or a novelist's... in that I try to keep people alive.' The Mock Turtle nodded, encouraging him.'Everything we get ourselves involved in is a plot. A messy one, of course, not like a plot in a book. Most books are tidy. They belong to types and kinds and genres, and we know the rules for those genres. Cowboys or romance or horror. There is a clear line they have to follow. But watch out if you get caught in one of those plots! That kind of plot wants to kill off all your characters. Or flatten them into mere... functions.'

'Yeah, yeah,' muttered his.

'My job,' he said,'is to keep us all out of the trap of genre-death. The interesting parts of any story, or any life, to me, are the parts where life just goes on. It's just to the sides of the big adventure. The bits that overstep the boundaries of convention.' He seemed pleased with that. 'Your life!' laughed Iris. 'Your life is all genre! Who else do you know who meets up - on a daily basis - with vampires, soldiers, murderers and

robots who want to take over the world?'

'Ah,' he tapped his nose. 'But my sense of genre and the right way of doing things is utterly skewed. I've never played these stories straight. My adventures - if we are to call them that, and I suppose it is the correct word - are a kind of bricolage. A large and teeming compendium of all sorts of alternatives.' With a flourish he produced theAja'ib from deep inside his coat pocket. Its cracked leather binding glowed in the vague and unreliable light. 'Wouldn't you hate to have a straightforward life?' he asked. 'Wouldn't you hate to be plotted out neatly? What would you think of a generic life?'

'I wouldn't mind,' said his stiffly. Tt mightn't be as hectic.'

'If we had a bottle of something,' said the Doctor, 'we might have a toast. To the picaresque life.'

'Doctor,' said the Turtle.'What is that remarkable book you have there?'

The Doctor drummed a contented tattoo on the hard binding. 'Just another picaresque novel. I picked it up in a bazaar in Hyspero when we arrived. Back whenever that was.'

'Weeks ago,' muttered Iris.

'It isn't by any chance theAja'ib , is it?'

The Doctor smiled. "That's exactly what it is.'

'Ah,' said the Turtle.

'What's your problem?' snapped his. The Turtle had got on her nerves. Here she was, alone with the Doctor while he was in a relatively good mood for once, and they had this creature for a gooseberry.

'I think you may have in your hands the single most effective weapon against the Scarlet Empress, or at least a bargaining tool. She wants that book, Doctor. She'll do anything to have it.'

And then, abruptly, utterly without warning, the fish stopped swimming. They were flung to the fleshly ground as it decided to beach itself on dry land. As its colossal mouth opened its innards were flooded with fresh daylight, which took some moments to reach into their hidden, pulsing

chamber.

They lay on the moist stomach lining. The Doctor pocketed the Aja'ib once more.'Did you tell the fish to let us go?' he asked the turtle. The light was oddly blue. A slight, ruffling breeze was showing them the way to clamber back out. It would be a tight squeeze.

The Turtle shrugged.

'Come on, his,' said the Doctor. 'I'll squash out first. Mind his teeth when you get to them. I think this is our stop.'

Grimly she followed the pair of them, through the rumbling, quivering gullet of the fish.

***

Gila couldn't free them from their cell. Sam couldn't help thinking that the Doctor would have got them out in a flash. His sudden demise had done a power of good for her retrospective appreciation of his abilities.

Angela suddenly said.'Do you really want to know how I started all of this?' Gila slid down the wall and sat, glaring at her. 'Do you want to know how I got you all into this?'

Sam nodded. She wondered if the Bearded Lady had lost her marbles, being wounded and all. But as she started to talk, Major Angela's voice was full of clarity and she was lucid enough, even if her tale was bizarre.

***

As Angela talked, theKristeva was doing something very odd indeed. They could barely feel the impact of it in their cell, deep within. The ship was lifting right out of the ocean. The engines thundered, turbines whined and the ship blazed with power as it sailed straight up into the night. Bits dropped off, but no one noticed, because the crew were in celebratory mood. They knew that their success that day would put Julia back into favour with her mother, the Empress. It was an opulently dressed crew that celebrated on deck with their Captain that night, one assured of a warm greeting when they returned, quite soon, to the Scarlet Palace. They caroused and drank as the great ship swept up, over the clouds, and headed back towards home.

***

The fish had gone.

Once they were spat on to the sands of this paradisal island, the fish slid backwards into the sea, and left them to it. They were stranded. But they were pleased - whatever the Turtle said - to see the back of the monstrous fish.

They turned their attention back to the island, with no idea about what they ought to do now.

'She'll get her own way now, the Empress,' fretted Iris. 'We've lost. And this is it. And I'll just die, alone, here, on an empty island.' She was seething.

The Doctor tried to calm her down, by building around her a little camp. In any other circumstances, Iris might have thought this a rather good set-up. The Doctor catering to her every whim. A tropical island and so on. Not for the first time in her extraordinarily long life, Iris reflected that it wasn't always marvellous when you got what you'dalways wanted.

The Doctor constructed for her a bower of rubbery leaves. She watched him work. Next thing she knew it was night-time, and the unfamiliar stars were quite stunning. The Doctor was mixing up potent cocktails, somehow, in coconut shells. They foamed over light medicine.

The three of them sipped quietly, locked in private thoughts.

Then the Mock Turtle said, 'Perhaps I should tell you what this is all about.'

'Hmm?' asked the Doctor.

'I shall tell you how, in the first place, the Bearded Lady came to steal the Eldest Empress, Cassandra.'

And so he started to tell them just as, at exactly the same time, only hundreds of airborne leagues away, Major Angela was telling her own side of the tale.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
The Bearded Lady's Tale

She had always been obsessed with how everything began and why.

Years before, Angela had been a real Major, with her own ship and crew. Sallying forth, boldly going, making first contacts, and generally stirring up the usual raft of interstellar ructions. Other crews would have to follow along behind her, bearing gifts and ambassadors and peace treaties. She plunged and plundered ever deeper into unknown space.

This career ended with a shore leave on the planet of Hyspero, where her ninety-nine-strong crew were all mysteriously killed by a changeling creature who also blew up her ship. Major Angela was trapped. She had led all her fellows into disaster. But then she found a new purpose, having heard from an offworld trader that Hyspero was a place with an alibi. Its famed Scarlet Empress knew all the answers - the answers to the questions about how it all began and why.

Angela disguised herself as a freelance troubleshooter and got together with Gila, the Alligator Man, whom she met in one of the capital city's less salubrious drinking holes. Soon she got herself involved in adventures, during which she met the Mock Turtle, and eventually the Duchess, in that episode with the vizier and his ship stocked with hearts and other vital organs. Before she knew it, the Bearded Lady was a famous citizen and heroine of Hyspero.

The four of them together took commissions from the Empress herself. They even met her, in the gold and crimson stateroom, where one wasn't allowed to speak above a whisper, for fear of shattering the monarch's precious glass or her sensitive eardrums. They said she herself was composed of organs of molten glass.

The four of them together - adventuresome genetic freaks as they were, complementing each other's strengths - escorted alien envoys and dignitaries, looted their ships for goods and information while their backs were turned, neatly assassinated rivals to the Empress and even once set alight a Dalek scout ship, which had touched down, on a recce, in the desert, far from home.

The Scarlet Empress had been pleased with her four pet warriors. Her instructions often came via the Scarlet Guard and fairly frequently. It was

very rare that they were admitted to her tender, near-silent presence. The Mock Turtle had nightmares for years about seeing her again.

Their final mission came when the Empress decided she wanted her own daughter and her motley crew aboard the Kristeva killed. The four were summoned secretly to the palace and calmly informed of this. It was quite a big job. They fought between themselves over whether they should take it on. Gila was all in favour, the Duchess indifferent, and the other two were plainly scandalised by the Empress's plan. This commission of the Empress was the beginning of the tensions that pulled their successful team apart.

While they quarrelled over the ethics of this, they were treated to the hospitality of the Scarlet Empress, each assigned an apartment in the palace's turrets.

The Bearded Lady did not want to waste this opportunity.

'What did you do?' asked Sam.

A pause.

Gila said impatiently, Tell her, Angela.'

Angela looked shifty and discomfited, and coughed in the steamy, fetid atmosphere of the cabin before going on with her tale.

***

In the throne room: three doors. She felt around the perimeter of the room and located them. How desperate, how raging with curiosity she must have been, to stumble blindly into the monarch's most secretive chambers. And how brave.

Angela wanted to open every door and find out what was in them. She wanted the dirtiest of the Empress's secrets. She wanted the most exalted of secrets, too.

And she found - without even being able to see them - the three rooms behind the doors. The circular, drum-like room where the Empress went when she wanted to look over her tame, mechanised dummies. They were still in their opulent dresses, primed and ready to dance for their mistress. She found the room that smelled of cured leather, and she

knew it was filled with the dried and hanged skins of her dead guards. She could imagine their exquisite pain, and their pinks and blues, as they draped the walls like mere garments.

Then the room of the seers. Their heads on stakes, still muttering. She stood bathed in blue and wondered if they might be talking to her. But there must having been a knack in taking their counsel because, to Angela, their quiet, ominous murmurs seemed indistinguishable. It was while she stood and listened, ears cocked, beard bristling, that she realised that someone had followed her on her nocturnal jaunt. Oh, so bravely, the Mock Turtle had stolen after her, worriedly, protectively, out of love for her. He was willing to share her every risk, even in this midnight headstrong escapade. She listened to him shuffle in, sensed him gasp at the sight of the severed heads. Secretly she was glad that she herself was spared the grisly sight.

But the seers were of no use to her. They could talk only about the future. This didn't concern the Bearded lady.What she wanted to know about was the distant, distant past. She wanted the answers to the big, big, big questions: why she was here, what was it that had put her there in the first place. These queries dwarfed the petty concerns of the future, she felt.

'Hmm,' said the Doctor, listening to the Turtle's recounting of events. "That's the law of diminishing returns. The future never lives up to what you imagine.'

'Nor the past,' sighed Iris.'Memory always cheats.' Back to the narrative in hand.

Hansel and Gretel, they found the tunnel that opened up beneath the sheer wax floors of the secret chambers beyond the state rooms. They drew in a long suck of breath before going off into that hole. Angela was glad, though she never quite said so, of the Turtle's eyes, for he had found them this portal; he was proving useful. And now the Bearded Lady trembled on the threshold of all she had dreamed of learning.

The tunnel unwound, unspooled, unfurled far into the rocky and loamy earth deep below the palace and below the city of Hyspero. The air they breathed was sour and still, and they supposed - in hushed, awed whispers - that it had remained undisturbed since the birth of the current Empress. And then they saw the jars.

The first jars in the long, long, long sequence that they followed were fully six feet tall. The most recent ancestors of the Scarlet Empress. The women were looking out at these visitors, their lips were pursed, they seemed to be sleeping. But the interlopers couldn't be sure. They pressed on. Gradually, by degrees, the jars became smaller. Four feet, three feet, two feet in height. The Empresses were shrinking with every half-mile they plodded. Soon they were up on a shelf, and still getting smaller, ranged at precisely regular intervals, so that the eyes of the little women were always at the same height as the visitors. The jars stretched out into the distance, like some seemingly endless wine cellar.

All the tiny women they saw - their various majesties - had hands clamped over their ears, as if this breaking and entering was the worst din they had heard in centuries.

Angela and the turtle never said a word. Only gradually did they become aware of a noise. A hollow, far-away chuckling. And it was this that drew them on. The two of them somehow knew that this distant cackle would bring them face to face with their objective. She was waiting for them.

The tunnels sloped and whorled like the valves of an inner ear.

The cackles and chuckles were joined by other voices, murmuring, chanting.

What raging monstrous madam split skulls and took out their hearts and minds?

Empress in her solitude! Unguents and jam!

Cement and ash! Unobtainable desires!

Children parentless in the gutters! Girls sobbing in old men's arms! Soldiers and husbands and wives on the streets!

Empress! Empress! Dream of Hyspero! Empty womb mother! Loveless and lunatic, the heavy prejudger, precursor, eldest of all our relics!

Empress in whom our maps, our lie of the land, our cartographies reside!

Empress whose intelligence is pure machinery and malice!

Whose eyes all see nothing, whose minions are everywhere!

Scarlet Queen whose factories and streets are cracked and seeping dust and filth to clog the endless tunnels!

Who loves oil and smoke

Who can't abide genius

Who severs heads and calls them seers

Who causes pain and scrawls designs on the hides of all her men

Empress who makes all on Hyspero lonely

Whose mind revolves and reaches the sky the earth, the seas, the snow, the woods to pluck up delicacies

Light rushing out of her piggy eyes

Empress! Empress! Robot frocks! Skeletal hordes! Capital! Capital! Demon mother of spectres and djinn and monstrous sensitivity!

We see it all!

We've all been here before you knew it!

We had those eyes, that strident voice the eardrums on which the slightest sound will horribly impinge

You keep us here, Empress, Empress

take us out into the streets, strew our way with flowers

take us back and tip us in the water.

At last they were on the final stretch. The jars here were no larger than coffee pots and yet the cackling came even louder. Inside their thick fluids the tiny queens rocked and quivered with mirth.

Angela was aware that the Mock Turtle clung to her elbow. She hated the feel of his clammy hooves. Mussing up her pristine uniform. She knew that he loved her. He made those dewy cow eyes at her at every

possible opportunity. Down here, in this thrillingly horrid place, he hung on to her and she was dragging the weight of both of them. His dark glossy turtle shell was quite a weight. She knew it by touch and that it was the most beautiful thing about him. The Bearded Lady had often thought that - it was glossy and coruscated like a huge thumbnail, whorled and ridged. How appalled the Turtle would be if he knew that she often thought about killing him, just to extricate his meaty self from that gorgeous shell. She would dispose of his body and keep his little protection for herself.What an ornament he would make. It was just as well, she thought, that the four of them were almost ready to disband - before the temptation to wrest his jewel away became too great for her.

'I think we are coming to the end,' the Turtle whispered.

***

On the beach, the Mock Turtle was coming to the end of his own telling of the tale. He regarded his audience dolefully and was privately pleased to see that he had the Doctor and Iris enthralled.

'These tales are often about war and peace, the gaining and losing of property and of friends, and also about ill-considered deeds. This was one of those deeds.'

'She stole the smallest, oldest Empress!' said the Doctor, jumping to the end.

Iris shushed him.'Let the Turtle tell it.'

'We came before the final old woman, the very earliest one, and Angela started asking questions of her. "I am here to demand answers to the biggest, the most fundamental questions. I need to know. I have been told that you will supply all the answers I will ever need. That only you have the knowledge."

'Inside that smallest jar,' the Turtle went on,'which was kept in a fairly nondescript alcove, for such an important personage, the old woman rocked and chuckled."Tell me!"Angela screamed and the rafters shook. The hypersensitive old ladies who lived in the tunnels squealed in protest. I was very frightened - that the tunnel would collapse and cave us in - and crush the entire living history of Hyspero. Then the oldest living Empress, Cassandra, manifested herself. She came out, at first, in the form of a golden cloud. Then she had a silver dress and curling

blonde tresses. There was a mocking sneer on her face. We were appalled. "Free me," she said, "and I will tell you anything you want."

'How are we to free you?" asked Angela.

'And she said we had to steal her and steal her jar, also. Before I could utter a word of protest, Major Angela took the jar and the Empress Cassandra gave a triumphant shout as she whispered back inside the glass. Angela stowed the jar inside her uniform. Then she dragged me back through the galleries and tunnels down which we had searched. We fled.

'Major Angela was breathless and mad with jubilation.

'We got back to the palace and flew to our rooms. Nobody had realised what we had done. I slept outside the room of the Bearded Lady, where she left me, on the blooming doorstep. I slept there fitfully, fearing the worst.

'And when I woke in the dawn, Angela was gone. Leaving not a trace behind her.'

'That was ten years ago,' said Angela smugly. 'And it's taken that long for the Scarlet Empress to discover her loss. She doesn't deserve an ancestor like her. And, anyway, the Eldest Empress Cassandra doesn't want to go back. She loves being my own personal djinn.'

Sam thought that Angela would soon be losing that particular service. 'Where is she now?'

'In my backpack,' said the Bearded Lady.'I keep good care of her.'

'And did you ask her?' asked Gila, suddenly intent. 'What happened when you rescued her and asked her for all the big answers?'

Sadly, with a strange smile, Angela shook her head.'She's never told me anything. She chuckles. She just laughs. Laughter is her only answer.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Welcome Back

On the island they spent some time organising their camp and settling in for the night. Ms lay by the fire and the Turtle went off to fish, claiming that he wasn't really very good at it, but he'd see what he could do. The Doctor looked thoughtful, staring into the flames.

'Iris, when we get out of all this, I'd like to read those diaries of yours. If you don't mind.'

She perked up and looked at him. 'Really? I thought you objected to them.'

'Maybe I was a little hasty.'

'You were!'

'Sorry if I was rude to you. Sometimes I hate it when people mention things from the past. I forgot so quickly you see. Some things, anyway. I don't like the thought that other people know much more about me than I do.'

'Don't worry about it,' she said.

'Maybe if I read what you've wrttten. I'd learn something. I go crashing around the place, making the same mistakes, getting involved in all the same problems. Perhaps if I listened a bit more, I'd manage to have a quieter life.'

'Do you want a quieter life?'

He laughed. 'No.'

She struggled to sit up. It was cooler now on the island, with the sun gone. 'Listen. You go on and make the same old mistakes if you want. Live the same glorious life again and again if that's what you want. I envy you that. You're a young man again! You can do exactly what you want.'

She reached out for his hand and went on. 'If I get through this whole thing and manage to get myself better, and if by any chance I get to be a

younger woman again, that's exactly what I'll do. I won't take the weight of any history along with me again.'

They sat for a while in companionable silence. Then from down the dusky beach there was a shout and they turned to see the Turtle scurrying up the damp sand, with a clutch of squirming fish skewered on a branch.

'I think...' he called out nervously,'I think our transport problem is solved.'

'Oh yes?' shouted Iris.

'Someone has followed us.'

Iris rolled her eyes.'Not that big bloody fish, I hope.'

'No,' laughed the Mock Turtle, and pointed.

Through the gently crashing waves, rolling steadily through the churning spume and froth of the beach, came a dark, familiar shape.

'I don't believe it,' said the Doctor.

'Bless her heartl'yelled Iris.'She's found us!'

Emerging from the shallows, and with sea water streaming from her windows, leaving her a clean and glorious crimson, came the number twenty-two to Putney Common. Seaweed was clumped like laurels on her bonnet.

***

Julia had ordered that the crew were to put on all their finery. This night was to be their last as paid servants to the Empress and so the Kristeva was bedecked and beribboned. The pirates covered their ship and themselves with all the fancy dress they had hoarded over the years of looting and scavenging. The dressing-up trunks they had salvaged from wrecks came out, as did the gaudy vestments ripped from the backs of unfortunate, happened-upon seafarers.

Julia was drinking with Wittol, the heron-like creature who was her trusted lieutenant. They drank from thin glass boiling tubes, holding them carefully at their necks, and sipping the hot, sour nectar inside. 'She

promises us,' said Julia, 'that she will give me my freedom if we come through this.'

Wittol was amused. "Then you can sail off into the sunset,'

'Never go near hated Hyspero again.'

'What made the Empress decide to let you off the hook?'

Captain Julia shrugged.'I don't know and I don't care.'

'Only a year ago - when you told her you didn't want to be her heir - she wouldn't hear of it. She was ready to impound you and your ship immediately, and have all of us slain. Just for being your crew.'

'I think my mother wants to be Empress for ever,' said Julia. 'At one time she couldn't bear to think of giving up the throne. Then, as she got older, she had to think about it, and wanted to train me up for the job. You're right, Wittol - she always deplored my carousing and adventuring. Yet now she seems content - after this mission is accomplished - to let me go off and please myself.'

'Perhaps she has found a way to be Empress for ever, after all.'

'I wouldn't put anything past the current Scarlet Empress. She's always messing about with witchery and necromancers. Maybe shewill live eternally.'

'It must have something to do with our prisoners,' the heron said. 'Why not interrogate them and find out what makes them so special? Hmm? They look like a rabble to me.' Wittol's eyes burned. He had scores to settle with the prisoners.

Julia was thoughtful. 'We could keelhaul them, I suppose. Or make them walk the plank.We haven't had a really good torturing in donkey's years.'

'Shall I fetch them up?'

'Why not?'

***

Miraculously, the bus was quite dry inside.

'Oh, isn't she a marvel?' cried Iris, as the Doctor helped her aboard.

'Is this really a TARDIS?' asked the Mock Turtle in an awed tone. He braced himself and stepped through the double doors. 'Oh,' he said, looking around.

'Surprised, eh?' Iris winked.

'But it's...' the Turtle stammered.'It's the same size on the inside as the outside!'

"That's dimensional transcendentalism,' Iris called, moving rather clumsily down the gangway. 'Pushed into the next stage. The interior dimensions are even slightly smaller than the exterior. Isn't that ingenious! It's the latest thing.' She flopped down on to a sofa.

The bus was a dreadful mess. There were cushions and books everywhere. To Iris, though, it looked lived in and homely and it was pleasant to have it all back to herself at last.

'I'm putting the kettle on,' said the Doctor, dodging through to the kitchen.'And then -'

'Oh, get the gin out first,' Iris called. "There's some ice in the freezer.'

'And then,' said the Doctor firmly, 'I'm getting to work on your console.'

'You'll do no such thing!' She was scandalised.

'I'm getting this ship of yours back on the road.'

'You're not touching her! I've seen how you handle yours.'

He tutted.

'What does he want to do?' asked the Turtle, sidling closer to Iris.

'We're going straight to Hyspero,' said the Doctor briskly. 'We're going to catch up with the others and those pirates. And we're going direct.'

'We can drive along the ocean floor!' Iris protested. 'It won't take long. We're quite watertight.'

Suddenly he was determined. 'No, Iris. We're flying, I mean, through the vortex. I mean - vworp, vworp: there in a flash. That's what I mean. We're not wasting another moment. And this time you're going to listen to me.'

'Oh, Doctor,' she smiled, as he took out the tray of ice cubes and banged them out on to the kitchen work surface. 'You've gone all masterful.'

He rolled his eyes.

***

Gila decided he might as well put to use the thick, muscled prehensile tail he had recently grown.'Stand back,' he told the others and lashed it at the bolted door.'I might as well make the most of this... mutation.' The lock started to break away, flaking scabs and rust with each thud and thump he gave it. The door started to give way.

Angela struggled to her feet, clutching her wound. 'Why has your mutation started to accelerate?'

He growled and shouted in triumph as their prison door burst apart. 'How should I know?' He swung round his grizzled muzzle and Sam saw with a shock just how much he had changed during these past few days. 'Come on,' he said.

They hurried out into the lower decks of the ship.

***

Iris fell asleep with the Turtle watching over her. The Doctor worked busily in the cab of the bus, glad that Iris wasn't awake to see him disembowel the controls like this. He found her toolbox sadly depleted and lacking, and he kept coming across things like old lipsticks and pen tops.

'You're both Gallifreyan, then?' the Turtle asked him.

The Doctor looked guarded. 'You've heard of us?'

'Everyone comes to Hyspero, Doctor,' said the Turtle. 'Even Time Lords have come here to have an adventure.'

The Doctor didn't look as if he approved. He was soldering two bits

of wire that were sticking up rather annoyingly from the console, just to get them out of the way, but then they went up in a green flash. He pulled his fingers away sharply and sucked them.

'This ship is even older than mine,' he said.

Suddenly the Turtle looked alarmed. 'Doctor, I think Iris is unconscious. That doesn't look like natural sleep to me.'

'What?' He wafted away black smoke.

'Look.'

In the dim light of the bus Iris's dishevelled body was glowing a curious orange.

'Ah,' said the Doctor.'She's put herself into a kind of restorative trance. We haven't much time.'

'Why is she glowing orange?'

'How should I know?' he snapped.'We all do things differently. Put the lights on if it disturbs you.'

The Turtle sighed and did as he was told.'What's wrong with her?'

'She's quite vague about it. But she's picked up some dreadful bug from somewhere and she's very seriously ill. It's the whole reason for this ghastly runaround. That's why I have got to get to the Empress. Apparently she is the only one who can cure the old thing.'

The Turtle reached out to mop the old woman's brow.'Poor Iris.'

'Aha!' cried the Doctor.'I think we're on our way.' He stuck his head out of the cab.'I've almost fixed it.'

'Are we really going to dematerialise?'

'In a few minutes."

'Is there anything I should do?'

'Your ears might pop. Have a jelly baby.' The Doctor was happy again. He jumped into the driver's seat and started flicking switches.'And hold on to your shell. This might just be a little rocky.

The bus rolled unsteadily across the dark sand of the beach. He did a reckless U-turn to bring them face to face with the foaming, unfathomable sea.

The Turtle sat himself down and clutched at a handrail, just as the Doctor put his foot down sharpish and accelerated. He sped them straight at the sea.

'Here we go!' he yelled, with a grin.

And, just before the tyres could meet the cold water, the vortex opened up before them, in a swirling, foggy tube. It was a much darker and perplexing blue than the night sky and it swallowed them and the bus in one neat gulp.

Once they were gone from the beach, the vortex collapsed itself tidily, like a telescope.

***

TheKristeva was banking into the clouds at a few hundred feet. This was the shock that Sam and the others had to deal with when they emerged, at last, on to the deck. 'I thought I couldn't hear the sea any more!'

'We're almost there,' Gila said.

They peered over the edge and they could see the dark land mass of Hyspero several miles away. Sam glared into its glittering lights, and could just about make out the turrets and spires and onion domes.

There were cries from the crew as they continued to make merry. The escapees could hear weird, discordant music from the poop deck. They thought they were lucky that the crew were so distracted. But then there was a noise right on their tail. Someone had discovered them.

It was the Sahmbekart who had accompanied them earlier to their cell.

He gave a guttural gasp of pleasure as they whirled in surprise.

Gila was in no mood to deal with this now. He pitched himself at the dense green bulk. The two of them fell, grappling, to the deck.

'Lifeboats!' Angela bellowed and she hobbled across the floor, wincing in pain. 'Help me,' she told Sam. Sam edged around the two reptilian men as they wrestled and grunted on the ground.

'That sounds rather nasty,' Angela muttered. 'Can you see the lifeboats?'

Sam pulled her over to the side, where a small, snub-nosed vehicle was tethered. 'Pull off the tarpaulin,' Angela snapped, and found, by touch, the electronic moorings.'We can get away in this. Leave them to it.'

Then Sam looked up and saw that Wittol, the heron creature, was with them.

'I was just coming to get you,' he said, his bill clicking and shining in the moonlight. 'It's time for some fun.'

Major Angela swore at him. He lunged at her, but both were knocked off their feet by Gila's tail, as he and the Sahmbekart crashed into them. Sam backed off hurriedly. And then she saw that theKristeva was under attack.

'Look!' she yelled, but none of the brawlers were listening. The Bearded Lady was lashing out at whoever came closest.

Sam stared up at the sails of the ship. A great mass of flying bodies had settled about the rigging like a swarm.

All over theKristeva , cries were going up from the crew as they noticed the onslaught from above. Their sounds of celebration abruptly ceased as it became apparent that they were in some danger. Sam could hear Julia shrieking out commands.

Sam stared. The dark cloud came lower, slicing through the silk of the bellied sails. She could pick out individual shapes in the morass. They were birds. Hundreds of birds, of all types and sizes. They swooped and lunged with talons bared and their wings, she noticed, were charred black, as if these birds had swept out, en masse, from some circle of hell and were bent on exacting revenge. There were screams from the crew

as the birds flung themselves down to the body of the boat, their bills razoring and plucking at whatever flesh they could seize. The birds of the Kestheven forest, finding themselves homeless, had lost their interest in stories and the only narrative that concerned them now was one of indiscriminate revenge.

The birds were concentrating their attack on the poop deck. This gave the escapees a few moments, perhaps. Sam hurried to finish preparing the lifeboat - abandoning subtlety and bashing at the small keyboard that worked the moorings. She unleashed a torrent of sparks and then the small boat began to unlock itself gracelessty. She clambered - heart in mouth - over the side of the ship, and into the boat. Then she glanced at the controls. Nothing she couldn't handle. She knocked the tarpaulin completely free and watched it wheel and kite far below, through the sky and into the sea. Then she yelled back at the others.

'Oi! You two! Stop enjoying yourselves and get in here!'

Wittol and the Sahmbekart crewman looked dazed. 'We're being attacked, you great lummox,' the heron snapped. He was trapped on his back, with Angela grimly pinning him down. His wings stirred as he feebly tried to free himself. 'Help Julia, Asnott. She'll need protecting.'

As the reptilian hulk lumbered quickly away, the heron prepared himself to knock back the Bearded Lady. That was when Gila spun around and, with one deft, sizzling slash, brought down his blade and hacked off the heron's head. His split neck, bleeding profusely on the deck, looked a spindly, useless thing. His head rolled off into the shadows.

'For Christ's sake, Gila,' said Sam.

'He had it coming.'

'It's all right,'Angela said.'We're all right. Come on.'

They jumped into the lifeboat behind Sam, Gila guiding the blind woman and checking that the thing was safe to fly. Then Sam started the engine, which kicked into instant, grateful life.

They left the Kristeva and her crew to fight their own battles.

Sam took a little guidance from Gila on guiding their tiny vessel, and set it streaking towards the golden lights of Hyspero. The wind whipped

away their words and it was alternately hot and cold as it blew around them - full of sea mist one moment, then sandy grit, then smog and smoke fumes. Sam started coughing.

They turned to watch, when they reached a safe distance and their course was locked, as the dense mass of black birds covered the ship behind them. Someone seemed to have had the bright idea of getting rid of the attackers by setting fire to the Kristeva's sails. Up they went in a spectacular blue light. They took only seconds. They burned like paper and soon, great gouts of smoke went plunging into the sky.

"They'll sink her,' said Angela.

'Good riddance,' Gila muttered.

As they headed inland they watched the proud and bulky vessel topple slowly, backwards, out of the sky. It started, by infinitely slow degrees and then with increasing force, to slide, inexorably, hundreds of feet, back down into the sea. By the time it met the water it was all aflame, taking many of the birds with it. Their bodies whirled around and about it, like wicked mascots.

Gila grunted with satisfaction once this was all over and then he wrenched the lifeboat's controls from Sam. She protested at his brusqueness.

'Look,' he snaried,'there's no time for manners. I know this city. You don't. I know where to take us. Now get out of my way.'

They shot over the rooftops.

Night-time in Hyspero.

Below were the usual revels, carnival crowds and raucous screams. It seemed like years since Sam had last been here.

Major Angela looked bilious behind her matted beard.'I never wanted to come to this place again.'

Gila found them a space to land. It was in the docks, a shady and uninviting part of town. He steered them expertly away from the crowds, to a space by a jetty. With only the slightest of bumps and scratches, they came rolling out of the air and landed intact in the semi-dark. The

water's edge was marked with pale-green globes of light, like monstrous fruits.

'This is right next to my little place,' he told them.

'Oh,' said Angela.'Your famous secret hideout.'

'Do you want that shoulder seeing to?' he asked nastily, not liking her tone.'Or do you want both your arms snapping off?'

'You're starting to get on my nerves, Gila.'

'Good. Then, you -'

'Listen,' said Sam.'Can't you -'

They were just stepping out of their lifeboat. Before they had even walked away from it they found they were surrounded.

An entire, resplendent platoon of the tattooed Scarlet Guard stood about them. They had arrived silently.

'Welcome back,' one of them smiled, his features a dense, complicated mesh of designs.'I believe that you have something the Empress would like to take a look at.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine
With the Empress

At first glance all Sam could see was a pair of eyes. Somewhere in the midst of that pink gunk inside the tank there was a glaring pair of eyes, watching them as they were led into the gold and crimson throne room. Eyes with pupils as red as Iris's bus.

The guards had instructed them on being silent. The Empress, they were told, was excruciatingly sensitive.

The three prisoners were led across the cool marble floor and brought to a halt before the jar. As Sam stared she could make out the vague shape of the woman inside. For a moment she felt a twinge of pity for the being caught inside the glass. She could feel the self-pity and resentment hanging like damp steam on the air - the bristling waves of paranoia emanating from that person.

And what a sight we must be, thought Sam: a sight for red, beleaguered eyes. Battered, filthy and bruised. The Bearded Lady's white suit was stiffened and brown with dried blood; she looked fit to drop. Only Gila held himself erect, snarling and prepared for action yet again. The tattooed guards held their weapons at the ready. The message was clear: they were in the presence of royalty and there was nothing they could hope to do to endanger the Scarlet Empress. Sam was shocked at first by the guards' nakedness here inside the palace. They paraded quite shamelessly, displaying their gaudy markings. She stopped looking after a while, however. There were more pressing matters.

When the Scarlet Empress spoke at last, her voice seemed to be coming from an ancient wireless. It was distant and crackly.

'We expected there to be more of you.'

Major Angela coughed. Too loudly. A guard stepped forward and held his dagger at her throat.'Quietly,' he whispered.

'One of us was destroyed,' the Bearded Lady hissed.

"That raddled old hag I sent after you?'

"The Duchess died,' growled Gila, low in his scaly, dewlapped throat.

'Killed by that monstrous tusked creature you sent.'

'Did I send a creature?' the Empress pondered this.

One of the Scarlet Guard nodded curtly.

'Perhaps I did. So where is the hag I sent to fetch you all?'

Sam's voice was very steady. 'She was killed along with the Turtle and the Doctor. I think you'll find that was your fault, too.'

'Who is this child?'

'She got caught up in all this,' rumbled Gila.'You should let her go.'

'I'm not going anywhere!'

'Quieter!' urged the guard again.

'I'm staying here till the bitter, bloody end.'

'It might just be that,' hissed the Empress. The pink-rimmed eyes slid to stare at the Bearded Lady.'Major Angela.You have done some terrible things, haven't you? Wasn't it you who set yourself up as the queen of a small piece of land? Didn't you have the gall to enslave subjects and make them do your bidding?'

Angela looked grim.'I did,Your Majesty.'

'Now, you know that was wrong. Aren't I the only Empress?'

Angela's mouth twitched. She sounded almost ironic as she replied, 'No, your Majesty.'

Those eyes flashed.'You know there is very little chance that you will be leaving this room with your hideous bearded head still on those shoulders?'

'Yes,'sighed Angela.'I gathered that.'

For the first time Sam felt a real pang of fear.

'Of course,' said the Empress. "The very worst thing you ever did was to

steal something from me. Do you have that particular... article on your hirsute person?'

'I do.'

'And would you like to produce it?'

Angela unshouldered and started to open her grubby backpack. This was her only chance, she thought. If the Eldest Empress Cassandra would only manifest herself again and act and speak on their behalf... then that was the only chance they still stood of coming out of this alive.

'Hurry,' said the Scarlet Empress greedily. 'You have kept me waiting long enough.'

'Give her a moment,' Sam shouted. 'She's wounded! We've all been through loads of stuff to get here, you know...' One of the guards lashed out and knocked her flat on her back.

Sam yelled again and scrambled up in anger, when she noticed that everyone was staring in horror at Major Angela.

The Bearded Lady was holding her backpack upside down.

'Angela,' Gila said. 'What... ?'

But the bag was quite empty.

***

All around the bus, the vortex howled and churned.

'Here we are again,' said the Doctor, fiddling with co-ordinates.'Iris is going to be so pleased she let me have a go at her console. I've done a fantastic job on this. Now why is it you can't fix your own ship, but when it comes to somebody else's -'

'Doctor!' the Turtle shouted.

'Ah,' he smiled, stepping out of the cab. 'How are you enjoying your first foray into that mysterious region where time and space are one?' Then he looked at the stricken bovine-chelonian creature. 'What's wrong?'

Iris was sitting bolt upright. That curious radiance had dropped away from her like a shroud. She looked like death. She said two words,'Help me,' and fell down again on to the faded and overstuffed chintz.

'Get her a drink,' the Doctor cried, and headed back to the controls. 'We really haven't much time.'

'What's happening to her?'

' She's at a critical stage!' he yelled. 'And so are we.' The controls fizzed and shook.'We're about to arrive...'

***

The liquids and pink mucus in the jar had turned a poisonous red. Over her primitive loudspeaker the Empress was screaming: 'Kill them! Kill these worthless philandering fools!'

The throne room erupted as guards appeared from nowhere and dragged Gila, Angela and Sam up on to a raised dais to one side of the room that already, they discovered, had heavy chopping blocks prepared for them. There was nothing they could do, though Gila fought with every scrap of strength he had left. They were overpowered and hauled up the steps of scarlet stone and their throats were placed on the old cold wood of the blocks. Scimitars were briskly whetted with a swift shushing noise.

'Kill them now,' whispered the Scarlet Empress, pressing her gnarled fingers up against the glass, pushing as close as she could in order to see every detail of the massacre.

Sam briefly considered screaming.

Then:

Between the chopping blocks and the Empress's tall glass jar, the air started to buckle and tremble and then to solidify. A tremendous wheezing, groaning sound rent the air. A breeze plucked up out of nowhere and the scimitars were lowered in puzzlement and dismay. The Empress put her hands to her ears and howled out her pain and rage, and Sam's heart jumped into her mouth as, in the middle of the bloody marble floor, a red double-decker bus quickly made itself apparent.

The guards scattered.

The Empress screamed.'Too noisy! Too loudl'The spindly arms inside the glass flailed and wheeled as she was consumed in agony. The confused guards ran to help her, appalled by her pain.

Sam and the others found themselves intact and unguarded.

'It's him!' Sam yelled.'It's them! They've come for us! They survived!'

The Empress screamed again.

'Make more noise!' Angela cried and hurried off towards the bus.

The hydraulic doors flew open and the Doctor stepped breezily out to face the livid guards. His tangled hair stood up wildly and his cravat was all awry.'Hello, boys,' he smiled.

'It's him!' the Empress gurgled and frothed.

'Doctor!' Sam yelled.

'Hello, Sam,' he said.'Now, don't be too noisy. The Empress doesn't like it. Do you, dear?'

'Kill them all!' shrilled the Empress.

'Ah, now,' the Doctor said.'Perhaps that's not such a good idea.'

The tattooed men rounded on him, swords glittering.

'Stay back, gentlemen,' he warned, in a soft, cajoling tone.

'Slay him!' the Empress exhorted.

The Doctor shrugged. 'If you must. But I can't say that I think it's awfully fair if you do.' He felt inside his capacious coat pockets. 'Especially since I've brought back the exact thing you sent us out to recover.'With a flourish he produced from inside his coat a fairly small, stoppered jar.

Everything stopped and fell silent.

The guards drew back.

The Doctor grinned. He stared into the jar's glaucous depths. 'I thought that would make you listen.'

Angela made a choking noise. She said, 'When did you...?'

He shrugged carelessly. 'I pickpocketed you a few days ago. Dreadful habit of mine. You can't be too careful around me, you know.' He stepped forward with a polite cough and waved the guards further back.'Out of my way, you lot. And put some clothes on.' Then he glared at the Scarlet Empress and addressed her in fine, hectoring style.

'Now, would I be right in saying that the tiny woman in this jar is someone you want back?'

The Empress's voice came as if through painfully gritted teeth.'Would you talk a little more quietly, Doctor?'

'Me?' he smiled haplessly. 'Oh, I can't talk quietly. What's the point? Answer my question.'

'Yes. I need her back.'

'Have you asked her?'

The Empress cursed.'Why should I ask her?'

'Well, she might not want to come home. This old lady might be having the time of her life.'

'She is my ancestor. She belongs here with me. You have no right to presume to tell me where she should be!'

'Shall we see?' asked the Doctor.

The Empress suddenly looked alarmed.

The Doctor turned on his heel to face the guards and his companions. Sam thought, He's enjoying this. The showdown.

'Shall we ask the old lady in question?'

'Yes!' Sam shouted.

Major Angela gave a barking laugh.'Let her out!'

The Doctor took great pleasure in gently unstoppering the jar.

The noise that came rushing out - the sound, perhaps, of the very teeth of a tempest, or the endless random cacophony of the sea - made the Scarlet Empress squeal in pain. The golden miasmic light that suffused the throne room blinded her guards until they had all sunk to their knees. And, in the middle of all of this, quite suddenly, and quite serenely, stood the oldest Empress of all, Cassandra. She was staring at the current Empress, who cowered inside her own jar.

Eight metres tall stood Cassandra. She was leering spectacularly at them all. Her legs stood wide as tree trunks, both a luminous gold. The bus came only as high as her waist. She threw back her mass of yellow hair and laughed at them all.

'And so I am free at last.Who would have believed it? Back in the old palace again.' She shrugged a massive fur stole around her shoulders and took in the whole scene.'I can't say it's improved much. Except for all the naked boys around. That's a new touch, honey,' she told the Empress. "That's about the only decent change you've made.'

'Get back into your jar!' commanded the Scarlet Empress tinnily.'Your time has gone! You've no place here.'

'I've every right to be here, sweetheart. I was here before any of you lot.'

'But you should be underground.With all the others. I'm the Empress now.'

'Your time is up,' said Cassandra.'I know what you're planning, honey. And it isn't going to work. Your time is running out and you're getting desperate. You want to be Empress for ever and ever. I'm here to stop you.'

The Eldest Empress seemed to be swelling ever further and growing even larger. Her radiance was hurting the audience's eyes. 'Time starts round again this very day,' she cackled, hugely. 'It is countless... oh, hundreds of thousands of years since I kicked it off in the first place, and today is my anniversary. Now I'm back to start it all again. You're finished!'

'Help me!' the Scarlet Empress squawked and the guards clustered haplessly about her.

'She is a charlatan,' Cassandra thundered. 'She's kept my many daughters and me captive and stoppered up inside our jars for thousands of years, with no one coming down to let us out, even for a second. This is how time is meant to go on - with me coming back!'

'She's good, isn't she?' the Doctor asked Sam, and promptly started dragging her towards the bus. "This reminds me a little of get-togethers with my other selves.'

'Where's Iris?'

'Ah, well. She's...'

The Eldest Empress spread her massive, wrinkled hands and sent bolts of sheer lightning that crackled around the throne room. The guards clutched their heads and dropped to the floor.

'Run!' the Doctor yelled.'Everyone - get aboard!'

Major Angela turned to Gila.'Do as he -'

Gila was on the floor. He looked up at her, snapping his tremendous reptilian jaws. His limbs had shrunk and stunted to proper alligator size, his elbows fledging up to support his wide torso. He had completely reverted. His tail lashed furiously. Even without being able to see him, Angela knew what had happened.

She left him and ran across the marble floor to the others as the blue lightning continued to burst around the room.

'Give in, sweetheart,' the Eldest Empress laughed. 'Give up now, daughter. While you still can!'

The Scarlet Empress writhed inside the jar.'Never!'

The glass exploded then, cracking and falling into thick, greasy shards. Gallons of pink, lucid glue poured out across the red marble.

'Daughter...' the vast Cassandra said.

A body slumped out on to the hard floor. She lay in the unguents, ruined, emaciated, almost formless.

'Quickly,' the Doctor yelled, hauling his companions aboard. He slammed the bus doors behind them.

They watched through the windows as the golden radiance flooded the room. They heard the ancient Empress's words:

"This is how time begins anew. As it was meant to be.'

They turned their eyes away as the room exploded, quite soundlessly, into gold, and then white.

Then the windows all turned black.

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After a moment, Sam asked,'What's out there?'

'Nothing yet,' the Mock Turtle said.'It's all going to start again.'

'Has Hyspero been destroyed?' asked an oddh/ dispassionate Angela.

'Not destroyed; said the Doctor. 'In the process of being renewed. Closed for refurbishment, you could say.'

Sam looked around.'Where's Gila?'

'Still out there,' the Bearded Lady told her. 'Something had happened to him. He lost his human self completely.' She sank on to a sofa.

'Iris!' Sam gasped.

The old woman was lying nearby. Untouched by recent developments. She looked dead.

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'I think the time has come to sort her out. It's time to call in a favour or two.' He gazed out at the blackness for a moment. Then he straightened his green frock coat and marched to the double doors.

'You're not going out there,' Sam told him. She didn't want to lose him again so soon.

'I think it's all right,' he said. 'Just a bit gloomy. And messy.'

'There's nothing out there!' the Bearded Lady protested.

The Doctor turned to them all and grinned. 'Oh, but there's always something out there.'

Then he opened up the doors of the bus and stepped outside.

Chapter Thirty
Something for Iris

It was true enough. The interior of the palace was gloomy and messy. Part of the ceiling seemed to be ripped away, revealing the sky. Turrets were cracked. Rubble and bodies were strewn about the floor. Outside, lightning rolled and splintered across the rooftops. The revellers of Hyspero had stopped revelling.

The Doctor tiptoed lightly away from the bus. He let his eyes adjust to the dark.

At the far end of the room he could make out the tall glass shards of the jar. The Scarlet Empress's body was sprawled across them.

On a step sat a quite average-sized woman in a golden sheath of a dress.

He sat down beside her.

"That's that, then,' he smiled sadly.

'I wish she'd been a bit more sensible,'said the Eldest Empress.'It's so cold in here, isn't it?' She sighed. "There's such a lot to sort out.' She fiddled with the clasps on her shoes. 'I never even wanted to be Empress, really.'

The Doctor looked thoughtful. 'Cassandra, I need your help.'

'You do?'

'Or Iris does.' He picked up a sloppy handful of the spiUed, pink, life-preserving glue that had kept the former Empress together. 'She needs this stuff.'

Cassandra shuddered. 'It's filthy stuff.'

'She'll die without it.'

'It's very hard to get a hold of.'

'I'll get it. Just tell me how.'

The Eldest Empress stared at the back of her hands. The Doctor was fascinated to see the liver spots fade before his very eyes, her wrinkles and stresses smoothing out of her skin even as they talked. 'And yet,' she said, 'you always seem to make out that this Iris person is a complete disaster, every time you bump into her.Wouldn't you rather she was out of your life for ever?'

He sat back. 'So she couldn't go round any more, telling everyone my secrets? Writing everything down? So she couldn't claim that she'd been off, haring round the cosmos in her clapped-out bus having my adventures? And so she couldn't periodically crop up in my life and claim she was in love with me?' He laughed softly.

'Wouldn't it be easier for you if you just let her die?'

He shook his head.'I don't think so. She's my friend.'

'Really?'

The Doctor stood up.'Now that's a proper Empress talking.You can't afford friends, can you? Can't let anyone in, can't trust anyone. If I was you, I wouldn't either. I would hate to have power like you have now.' He gestured to the spoiled body of the Scarlet Empress.'Or power like she had up until a few minutes ago. Power like that puts you outside of ordinary life. Ordinary life is where everything is a struggle and muddle and you can only do your best. The likes of you only have to click your fingers and it's a matter of life and death. Horrible.'

Cassandra narrowed her eyes. 'Like I say, I never wanted to be Empress.'

'But there's no one left to do the job, now.'

'I know, even Julia is dead. Her own mother sent the birds to destroy the Kristeva . She was mad. She even killed her own daughter.'

'It's a job that can send you mad,' said the Doctor. 'You be careful. Remember Catherine the Great.'

Cassandra appeared to reach a decision. She brushed the debris off her shining frock.'All right, Doctor. I'll grant you your little wish.You can get on with it while I start some clearing up.'

Then she clicked her fingers.

'Thank you,' the Doctor said, and promptly vanished.

Cassandra watched him go with some satisfaction. She looked up into the ruined ceiling and noted that the dark sky was beginning to brighten. A blush of blue was spreading through the heavens. Then there was a shout.

Sam came hurtling out of the bus.

'Where have you sent him?'

'Ssh, honey,' said the Empress.'Not far. He'll be all right.'

The Bearded Lady was by Sam's side.'How far?'

'Extreme north,' the old woman said simply. 'A small mission for his friend.' Then she rallied.'Come on now, everyone.We've got work to do.'

They stared at the ruined throne room.

Blearily, the Mock Turtle was emerging from the bus.'I think it's too late for Iris,'he said, quietly.'There's no pulse.no breathing.'Suddenly he froze, his dejected hooves held out in mid-air.'Look!'

They turned to see where he was pointing.

An alligator had scampered out of the shadows. Quite a young, nimble beast, the increasing light sparkling on its shining scales. They stared, appalled, as he made for the body of the dead and fallen Scarlet Empress. And they listened to the clamping and rasping of his powerful jaws. Gila was innocently feasting on her body and the life-preserving gels.

Chapter Thirty-One
Stealing Honey

Extreme north on Hyspero was like nowhere else on that world.

The Doctor sat up and gazed around. The air was golden and blue, shining lucently through ceilings and walls.

He stood and brushed himself down.

In the distance he could hear the manic humming and drone of the bees. He knew all about them. He knew about the alchemy of their honey-making process. He knew it was fresh honey he needed, not the sickly, stultifying brew that the Scarlet Empress had basked in. This much he had learned from his study of the Aja'ib . He patted the book in his coat pocket. Everything came in useful. Now he had work to do.

He strolled and got used to the soft waxy feel of the walls and floors, the cloying sweetness in the air. It was like walking and breathing in a whole new substance. Somewhere, beyond the walls of these tunnels and cells worked bees the size of bicycles. But they didn't bother him. He'd dealt with viruses the size of lobsters, lobsters the size of dinosaurs and dinosaurs and other horrors again and again in his hectic career. He started to whistle.

When he came to a wide, open space and a choice of routes, he took out the old leathery book and opened it to the relevant page.

He traced through the arcane words with his finger and muttered a particular spell.

With a flash and a rush of dusty air, the massive, bronzed figure of the kabikaj, djinn lord of insects, stood patiently before him.

'Doctor,' he grumbled. "This had better be good.'

'I've got a little task for you,' smiled the Doctor.'Something I think you might help me with.'

Chapter Thirty-Two
A Month Later

Sam woke in her unfamiliar bed. Satin sheets. Street noise outside. Incense burning still. All around her bed, night lights flickered. She stirred and decided she had slept quite enough.

For a while she sat out on her parapet, watching the bustling streets below. She picked at and peeled grape after grape. The crowd down there, below the palace, consisted of an odd mixture of the night-time crowd, still out enjoying themselves, and the early-morning traders, wheeling their multifarious produce into the streets on barrows. The offworlders were back. Hyspero had returned almost seamlessly to its usual routines.

There was a knock at the heavy wooden door and she turned to see the Mock Turtle apologetically poking his head round the gap. She motioned him in.'Sit out here with me,' she said. He was a little less shy with her now. He peered cautiously over the balcony.

Apparently,' he said,'the Empress will see us this morning.'

'Good,' Sam murmured, and wondered what she ought to wear.

'I don't think it will be good news,' he added gloomily.

'She has to help,' Sam burst. 'She's got the resources. She can send a whole platoon out to look for him.'

'The way she looks at it, she needs all of her resources here, rebuilding the palace. Undoing everything the previous Empress did wrong.' How resigned the Turtle looked, she thought, slumped inside his shell like that.

'Do you think she's going to suggest we give up on waiting for him?'

'I think so, yes.'

Sam's eyes flashed with anger.'If it wasn't for him and Iris, Cassandra would never be back on that throne. She'd still be out in the wilds of Kestheven. Living in a jamjar.'

The Turtle looked uncomfortable. 'I wish Angela hadn't gone back there. We could do with her help in petitioning the Empress.'

Sam was still cross with the Bearded Lady for leaving so soon. She should have been more grateful, too.'I suppose she wanted to get back to those bears of hers.'

'Go and get ready for our audience,' the Turtle urged.'I'll wait here.' Sam was bathing, moments later, in the deep verdigris tub in the next room, when she heard the Turtle shout through.'Have you checked that the Doctor's Ship is all right?'

She told him that it was all sorted. It was ready for him whenever he returned. Then she was quiet as she got out, dried herself, and pulled on Hysperon garb. Layers and layers of gaudy fabric, most of them scarlet. For the past month she had dressed as a local. On a sudden impulse, though, this morning, she went to the cupboard and found her own clothes, her T-shirt and shorts, washed and good as new. She took off the layers of scarlet and put them on. Sam was ready to go.

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In the staterooms of the palace, everything appeared to be back to normal. The guards were back on duty, resplendent in their tattoos, marching about. The rubble had been cleared, the frescoes refurbished, and the ceilings patched up. One of Cassandra's first decrees was that the rooms filled with motorised mannequins, hoarded tattooed skins and severed heads should be dismantled. These relics of the previous monarch's obsessions were buried, safely, in the desert. The guards who buried the staked heads of the seers said that, as they poured the sand into the hole to cover them up, the poor devils were still muttering their dire prophecies. Cassandra had announced there would be no more prophecies. Hyspero would have to concentrate on living in the present.

Sam and the Turtle went before the Empress.

They found her in a pleasant mood that morning. Since her youth was restored, and she had found her place on a gold and crimson throne, her moods had been changeable to say the least. In the past weeks she had been rather volatile at times, stressed by the work still to do.'I've been on holiday for thousands of years,' she had moaned at one point. 'Of course I'm stressed now I'm back!'

She chatted happily with the two of them and suggested that they should all go and look at Iris together that morning and check that the old lady was doing all right.'Perhaps there has been a change in her,' she said brightly.

Sam wouldn't bank on that. She didn't relish the idea of an afternoon spent beside Iris's tomb.

In a gilded cage beside the new Empress's throne sat the small alligator. He snapped his jaws at them.

'Poor Gila,' said the Turtle reflectively.

'Maybe he's happier like that,' said Sam.

'Perhaps,' said the Empress, and led them out of the throne room. She trod lightly across the marble floor.

Behind them, narrowed beadily, the alligator's eyes glowed a livid crimson.

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Iris lay on a bier in an antechamber lit by tall, pale-yellow candles. Someone had brought in sheaves of exotic purple flowers, and their heads stood perpetually opened, flaunting themselves.

In the dimmer recesses of this mausoleum, the bus was parked, as if ready to go off on another journey. Waiting for its mistress to awake.

Iris's face was quite peaceful. Her eyes were shut.

Walking after the Turtle and the Empress, Sam felt almost rebellious. The two of them were so hushed and respectful whenever they made these afternoon visits to Iris's chamber. Sam wanted to tell them: she's not going to move. Nothing's going to happen. Why are we even bothering? And anyway, Iris would hate you going on like this, being all quiet and hushed and awed. She wasn't like that. She was raucous and disrespectful. She would hate this! This was a woman who drove a bus through a desert and sang along to Abba at the top of her voice! Don't go singing ancient Hysperon death dirges at her bedside!

She sighed as they turned the corner, into the mausoleum.

And there was a figure bent over the bier.

A tall, dark figure. Slumped and fatigued, stooped over the supine and defenceless Iris.

Sam was the first to react. She bolted into the oppressive silence of the smoky room. She ignored the shouts of the others and went to grab this spectre, ready to pull him away.

He turned as she grasped his arm. Her hand had grasped a green velvet sleeve. Of course she knew who it was.

The Doctor turned to her and smiled tiredly.

Sam hugged him, burying her face in the silk of his waistcoat. He smelled sweet. He smelled familiar.

'I did it,' he said, addressing all of them. 'I got it and I've given her the honey. It's all swirling around her insides now. Now we just have to wait and see.'

Cassandra came up to greet him. 'Doctor,' she said. 'No wonder she loves you.'

Sam turned sharply. '

She means Iris,' he said.

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That night they feasted. They let their hair down. They tried not to think about Iris. The Mock Turtle talked about returning to the sea. The Doctor spoke briefly about having to leave soon, too. He had new projects afoot.

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In the night she sat up.

She looked around. She didn't feel fantastic.

'The buggers have left me!' she muttered. "They've sealed me in a bloody tomb!'

Then she saw the bus, standing in the shadows.

Iris clambered down off her bier, took a deep breath, and crept off to her ship.

Then it disappeared.

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In the morning there was, of course, no trace of her or the bus.

'I hope that means she's all right,' said the Mock Turtle.

'Silly old thing,' said Cassandra.

'Doctor,' began the Turtle,'Do you think she -'

But the Doctor and Sam were gone.

Chapter Thirty-Three
Inside The Machine

My TARDIS. I haven't been here in a long time.

The mahogany of the console smells of lemons. I stroke the panels and they are glossy under my fingers. Layers of varnish as if they had been lovingly polished for decades. The needles and dials rasp nicely as I turn them.

The gantries and pillars are all ironwork - with the holes through them that remind me of the roundels that lined the walls of the old, old console rooms. When I used to live with all that claustrophobic white. This, this is open. Cathedral-like. If you touch the ironwork you get rust, proper age-old rust that comes away on your fingers like pollen. Or like the scales from a butterfly wing if you're not careful enough. Lovely, felty dust.

I'm working at my console again. Paying attention to my own Ship, after weeks of absence. I know she knows I've been away.

I plunged us deep into the vortex, far from Hyspero, far from anyone. Quite elsewhere is where I want to be right now. This is the place I like to go when I want to forget what's been happening. Replenish myself, ready for the next thing. And there's always something new!

I stare at the blinking lights and enjoy their calm busyness. Their random, bingo-like flicker.

Sam comes in. She's washed and rested. She too is ready for the next thing. She always is. She's so young.

'You're thinking about Iris,' she tells me. I nod.'If she went off alone,' says Sam,'then she must be all right.'

Yet I can't help thinking that she slunk off like a wounded animal. She went off somewhere to die alone, in private. At the same time I know that solitude and dignity are not exactly Iris's forte. But you never know.

Sam rubs my shoulder.'You miss her, don't you?'

I smile.

Something lights up on the console. At first I can't remember what that particular signal means. Then I do.

'What's up?' asks Sam.

Someone is sending us a message. Maybe a distress beacon. Maybe a warning. Something. In my life, this is exactly the way new episodes always begin. Gladly, I flick the switch.

Sam gives me an ironic grin.'Is this Sam and the Doctor on their way to their next exciting adventure?'

'Maybe,' I say, trying to shrug off my mood and remorse.

Some kind of message is definitely coming in. Something visual, apparently.

'Scanner,' I say, and elect for the wider view. I throw the switch that activates the overarching ceiling scanner. It opens gloriously and displays the vortex in its giddying intensity, yawning and widening over our heads. I love that.

The scanner flickers and jumbles and then - eventually - we get the visuals. Someone is transmitting us live pictures, from some souped-up video camera.

Sam squawks.'It's Iris's bus!'

And indeed it is. In wide screen. In full Technicolor. The lower deck of Iris's old charabanc. She is delivering us a home movie.

And there she is. She's in the vortex herself. For some reason she's in antigrav. She spins and revolves in mid-air, alongside a scattering of floating teacups and novels and journals, cushions and teaspoons and parchment maps.

The old woman is glowing and spinning in the viscid-looking air. Then her features blur. She is changing. Sloughing off her old self. She peels off her cardigan, kicks off her sensible shoes and they drift away from her. She flings off her hat.

Her thick, aged flesh drops away. Her grey wiry hair shakes out, fanning around her, and it turns, as if ripening, into honey blonde. We blink.

Iris is suddenly young, still revolving on the air. She is wearing a silver, partly transparent bikini. She's young and laughing.

'She's regenerating,' I tell Sam.

Sam is grinning. 'She said she would.' She bangs the console with a whoop. 'She's sent us a video of her regeneration like she would a wedding video. Fantastic!'

Sam and I stare at the changed Iris. Massive and glorious she looms above our heads, and then she winks at us broadly. Renewed.

'She made it,' Sam says.

'Bless her hearts,' I reply, just as the picture breaks up and we are returned, once more, to the happily infinite vortex.

Afterword
Better than the Telly

When he was six my brother decided he was going to start buying Christmas presents. He was counting up his pennies in a small, dark newsagent's called Stevens, down the precinct in the town where we grew up, Newton Aycliffe in County Durham. Stevens used to be great. It's where we got Marvel Comics all through the seventies. It's a things-for-your-car-shop now. Mark had sixty pence in one fat little hand, and in the other, a slim white paperback, brand-new. Doctor Who and the Destiny of the Daleks by Terrance Dicks. He showed me it - the front-cover illustration was in pastel colours: Daleks emerging from gingerish swirling fog, Tom Baker pulling his face into an expression of mock consternation. Mark had come round the book stacks, looking for me, needing fifteen pence. I was four years older than he was. This was 1980.

'I need some money,' he said,'to buy you this for your Christmas.' He only showed me the book briefly, then hid it behind his back.

After that,Doctor Who was always mostly the books to us. That first one - succinct enough to read in two hours - set us off. The TV series became only so much raw material to be transformed. You could get only a few of the books we sought in earnest in Newton Aycliffe. We went to Durham, to Clarke's the newsagent, where in the cafe and bookshop upstairs they had a bookcase full of the whole series. Such a selection.Where did you start? We went with our mam and Charlie and, as a treat, they let us choose two each. This was important, because of the weekends we spent in Durham with our dad and he was into things like football, which we hated. Time with mam and Charlie was for the things we really wanted.

First off, the Tom Baker stories were the most important ones. And then the Dalek ones with any other Doctors in. We specialised early on our particular areas of research, with me branching out into stories aired and novelised before I was even born. These books could take you to times and stories only your parents remembered. Planet of , Invasion of ,Masque of , Genesis of . We read quite voraciously and uncovered the texts' various formulae: especially 'The X of Y', that most important of constructions. The qualifying of the threat of the unknown. As we went on we discovered the more oblique, more artistically succinct and opaque titles; The Tenth Planet , The Daemons , The Giant Robot .

Of course, reading the Target books made us both take up writing immediately. I sent my first roman-à-clef to Penguin when I was nine and they were rather nice about it.

The process of novelisation seemed to be a kind of alchemical reaction through which cheap TV material - shaky studio sets, lush, velvety capes and costumes, rubbery rubbishy monster hides - became the very stuff of seventies children's adventure fiction. I was already happilyau fait with classic children's fiction and the weirder end of the Puffin list, in which fantasy, mythology and magic were already a given, and lush descriptiveness was taken for granted - writers such as Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, E. Nesbit and Rosemary Sutcliff. What the Doctor Who novelisations seemed to have aplenty were adverbs and adjectives, and a knack for fitting them exactly to characters. The transition from screen to text was soothed by the adept use of very precise qualifiers. The Fourth Doctor did things with a particular panache: his pockets were capacious, his TARDIS voluminous, when he grinned it was wildly, he muttered derisively, and when his scarf was described as long, of course, it was ridiculously or incredibly long. In every sentence there was a certain lexical item that would become a clue to character, and those clues were sprinkled in, repeated and brought in again and again.

Very neat, those skinny books. We started borrowing them from Aycliffe town library, as well as buying them in Durham or from W. H. Smith's in Darlington. With each slim volume what we looked forward to were the inevitable repetitions - the consolations of habit.Young old faces, shocks of white or brown hair, ruffled shirts, multi-sided control consoles, battered blue police boxes. Those verbal tokens led us each time into a particular world.

At the end of the seventies, of course, that world was just about to end. That raffish, tousled, insouciant irreverence of the Fourth Doctor was about to leave the show and what was more, almost all of his stories were novelised. Doctors had only a certain span in those days - there were no missing adventures yet. In 1981 Tom Baker slipped Holmes-like from the gantries of a latterday Reichenback falls and suddenly it was the 1980s in earnest. I started comprehensive school. Thatcher was in power with a horrid vengeance. My parents were listening to Blondie and the Clash. The Doctor was younger, the stories both more scientific and more like a soap opera. And then, as the eighties went on, they spoiled the series, it seemed to me, making it too garish and ugly and crass. Oddly enough, the novelisations got better. Some editorial person

commissioned the stories as yet unrediscovered and filled in the gaps. The word novelised came into its own, the books a little better written. 'Novelised' came to seem to mean doing something completely: covering up, improving it. So we kept on reading them, until the stories ran out and then, by the time I went off to university to be, naturally, an English literature student, the TV show had finished too.

I still liked the way those early books moved along so skimpily, so fluidly. I thought that would be useful in the proper, original longer novels I intended to write. I loved Hardy, Lawrence, the Brontes, but next to Terrance Dicks and Malcolm Hulke, couldn't the Greats seem a little stodgy at times? That's how I was thinking.

By university I knew I was going to be a writer. I'd already finished a first, rather surreal novel called, interestingly, Iris Wildthyme . Halfway through my first degree I wrote the first confessional novel that everyone has to write and subsequently junk, and I called it A Handful of Lust . Then I went off, did an MA in creative writing and a PhD on contemporary literature and wrote the first two literary novels I would publish, Marked for Life , and Does it Show ?. Then I wrote the collection of stories, Playing Out . I was busy. I was writing literary fiction, by which I suppose we mean fiction with no holds barred, nothing sacred, no genre distinctions.

In the back of my mind I still wanted to write a Doctor Who book one day. Paying off a debt. Whatever. I moved to Edinburgh, wrote Could it be Magic ? and a second collection of stories. WroteFancy Man . Someone I met in Edinburgh read my first novel and pointed out that, in it, I described someone's pockets as 'capacious'. They guessed immediately I'd spent my formative years reading Target books.

I thought again about writing a Doctor Who story; constructing a big surrealist romp for the Doctor. Since I'd done my finals, Virgin had been publishing original stories. At first, unfettered from the limitations of the TV series in titles such as Genesys , Exodus and Revelation , Doctor Who seemed to come alive again and these were, indeed, adventures broader and bigger than TV would ever manage. They were coming closer to being proper novels, yet full of the old colour and magic, character and camp of the original. After a while, though, I felt some of the novels seemed to lose the drift and the wit of the series, which had never been about science fiction for me, anyway. Doctor Who was closer, in a literary sense, to magic realism, with its deft collision of the everyday with surrealism. When Kafka's Gregor Samson wakes one

morning transformed to a beetle in Metamorphosis , isn't he just living too close to a certain Welsh pit engulfed by the Green Death? When Salman Rushdie's devil and angel drop into London from the sky in The Satanic Verses, aren't they playing out part of the morality tale that threw together Pertwee and Delgado so often in the early seventies? When Spanish galleons appear untouched, impossibly, in the rainforest in Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude , might not they have been timescooped by someone toying with the very fabric of time and space? And Angela Carter's whole carnival of characters who are vampires, wolves, fat ladies and clowns might have come from one of the Fourth Doctor's more baroquely Gothic tales. That whole literary genre of magic realism, which came so extravagantly into the mainstream in the eighties, seemed to be exactly where Doctor Who belonged.

So I was pleased when the BBC started doing their own thing with the Doctor again. He seemed restored to us. Especially with the Eighth Doctor and his rather engaging simplicity, his relish of being reborn, his wearing velvet again, and his flouncing off into new, uncluttered adventures. This time he knew only a little more than his audience. No more all-knowing prophet-like Doctor. I was always pleased when the Doctor was content to blunder into things, and let himself meet fabulous characters in that sweetly picaresque, eighteenth-century way of his. So then I was ready to make a present to myself of my ownDoctor Who story.

I took Iris Wildthyme from my first novel, where she isn't a Time Lord at all, but still the same character and one who goes round blithely and drunkenly telling everyone that she is centuries old. I injected Iris into the Doctor Who universe (Umberto Eco somewhere calls this process, rather pretentiously, Transworld Migration) and here, Iris came to life again, as a particularly unshakeable old flame of the Doctor of old. Bless her.

So I wroteThe Scarlet Empress , and here it is.

In this book, I'm indebted to a curious imbroglio of texts and authors. In no particular order...

The Arabian Nights themselves, of course, Laura Riding, Angela Carter, Robert Irwin (for his fabulousArabian Nights Companion), Salman Rushdie, Ray Bradbury, R. A. Lafferty, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, Josef Von Sternberg, Fellini's Satyricon , Ray Harryhausen, Allen Ginsberg,

Italo Calvino, Jean Luis Borges, Jean Cocteau, Collette, Susan Sontag, Aubrey Beardsley, Casanova, Marina Warner... and so on and so on.

So, after all this time, here's my little foray into somebody else's fictional world. Someone else's, but one I was at home in before I found one for myself.

Paul Magrs
Norwich
March 1998.

Other DOCTOR WHO books include:

THE DEVIL GOBLINS FROM NEPTUNE by Keith Topping and Martin Day

THE MURDER GAME by Steve Lyons

THE ULTIMATE TREASURE by Christopher Bulis

BUSINESS UNUSUAL by Gary Russell

ILLEGAL ALIEN by Mike Tucker and Robert Perry

THE ROUNDHEADS by Mark Gatiss

THE FACE OF THE ENEMY by David A. Mclntee

EYE OF HEAVEN by Jim Morttmore

THE WITCH HUNTERS by Steve Lyons

THE HOLLOW MEN by Keith Topping and Martin Day

CATASTROPHEA by Terrance Dicks

MISSION IMPRACTICAL by David A. Mclntee

ZETA MAJOR by Simon Messingham

DREAMS OF EMPIRE by Justin Richards

LAST MAN RUNNING by Chris Boucher

THE BOOK OF LISTS by Justin Richards and Andrew Martin

A BOOK OF MONSTERS by David J Howe

DOCTOR WHO titles on BBC Video include:

THE WAR MACHINES starring William Hartnell

TIMELASH starring Colin Baker

THE E-SPACE TRILOGY BOXED SET starring Tom Baker

BATTLEFIELD starring Sylvester McCoy

THE MIND OF EVIL starring Jon Pertwee

HORROR OF FANG ROCK starring Tom Baker

Watch out for DOCTOR WHO: EARTH AND BEYOND on audio:

Three exciting short stories read by Paul McGann -

the Eighth Doctor!